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COMPLETE STORIES OF ... f Adventure.

...Matter at the N. Y. Post Office. Entered according to Act of ... D. C., by Frank Tousey, 29 West 26th St., New York.

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BY EX FIRE CHIEF WARDEN.

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DICK DECKER,

THE BRAVE YOUNG FIREMAN.

By EX FIRE CHIEF WARDEN.

CHAPTER I.

THE YOUNG FIREMAN—THE FIRE—HE MAKES AN ARREST AND IS THREATENED.

In the beautiful little city of Dunkirk, not a hundred miles from New York, a handsome young man was walking down one of the well-shaded streets, in company with a lovely young lady. He was about medium size, compactly built and graceful in carriage. His step was elastic and his movements denoted great strength and activity, whilst his laughing blue eyes and frank expression of countenance showed a genial spirit that made and kept friends wherever he went.

Such was Dick Decker, the noted young fireman of Dunkirk, whose daring deeds in raging conflagrations had made him the pet of the citizens of the thriving little city.

At the time of which we write, Dick was on a half-holiday, it being Saturday, and the machinery of the factory where he worked was being overhauled.

"No," he said to the young lady by his side, "it isn't often we have a holiday, hence we do appreciate one when we get it. You ladies have holidays nearly all the time, and——"

"Oh, you know nothing of the privations we girls have to submit to," replied the young girl, laughing. "I can assure you that we appreciate a holiday as much as the gentlemen do."

"That is because you are more capable of appreciating the good things of life than we are, I guess. You are but little removed from the angels, you know, and——"

"Oh, for mercy sake, *don't!*" exclaimed the young girl. "You are perfectly horrid in your flattery. Here comes Nellie Smith. You dare not talk to me that way in *her* presence."

"Indeed I would, and——"

Here the two girls met and greeted each other, as all young ladies do, with kisses, whilst the young man stood by and looked on.

They were both beautiful girls, and he really did not know which he admired most. Gossip accused him, however, of being a devoted admirer of Nellie. He had paid the other, Minnie Cranston, fully as much attention, though, and probably liked her as well.

"Oh, Nellie!" exclaimed Minnie, in girlish glee, "Dick has a half-holiday!"

"Indeed!" and then the young girl turned and extended her hand to him; "I ought to congratulate you, I suppose."

"I don't know that I deserve it," he replied, pressing her pretty little hand in his, "but I appreciate it for all it's worth. Now that we have met by chance, let's go for a walk up Chestnut Hill."

"Oh! how he does appreciate his holiday!" exclaimed Minnie Cranston, laughing merrily. "Yes, we'll go with him just to spoil his holiday, won't we, Nellie?"

"Yes," replied Nellie, as they turned into another street that led to Chestnut Hill.

Just as he turned the next corner, with a girl on each arm, the great fire-bell rang out on the balmy air of the still summer afternoon.

Ding-dong! ding-dong! ding-dong!

"It's a fire!" exclaimed Dick Decker, disengaging himself from the two girls. "Excuse me! Duty first!" and he was off like a race-horse toward the engine-house of the Dunkirk Fire Engine, leaving the young ladies staring at him in the greatest amazement.

How he did run!

He was accounted the fastest runner in Dunkirk, and now, as he was more than half a mile from the engine-house, he made the best time possible to get there.

People saw him coming and made haste to get out of his way, as they knew he must be a fireman going in response to the great fire-bell.

At one corner three wagons were standing in a row on the crossing, and one would have to cross over to the farther side of the street to get around them.

But he was not going to lose such precious time.

As foreman of the hook and ladder truck Liberty he was bound to be on hand in time.

Increasing his speed to the utmost, he placed both hands on the hind wheel of one of the obstructing wagons and rose in the air, clearing the vehicle at a bound.

"Jewhillikens!" exclaimed the countryman in the wagon, "that's a wild man broke loose from some'eres! Gosh Almighty, what a jump!"

The crowd cheered as he lit on his feet, and rushed off to the hook and ladder house, which was under the same roof with the engine.

Reaching the hook and ladder truck just as the boys were ready to start with her, he flung off his hat and coat, donned a fireman's helmet and a red shirt, seized his trumpet, and dashed out at the head of the line.

"Hurry up, boys!" he yelled through the trumpet, and away they dashed close at his heels, every man with a firm grip on the rope.

The terrible rush and clanging of Liberty's bell caused people to quickly move aside and give them the right of way.

They were ahead of the engine, and reached the fire in advance of it. The burning building was a dry-goods store, and the boys had nothing to do with the ladders, as everything was on the first floor, where the clerks and firemen worked like beavers to save the stock.

When about half the stock had been carried out, Frank made the discovery that the fire was the work of an incendiary. An oil-can and a few burnt matches told the story. But he said nothing until he saw a man kick the half-empty oil-can and send the inflammable fluid in every direction.

Then he seized him by the collar and began dragging him out of the building.

"Hands off!" the man roared.

"You are my prisoner!" exclaimed Dick. "You started this fire."

"'Tis false! Hands off, I say!"

"I arrest you!"

"You can't do it!" eturned the man, aiming a desperate blow at the young fireman's head.

Dick parried the blow, and then dealt one in return, stretching him at full length on the floor.

The flames and smoke now crowded him so close that he was compelled to vacate the room. But he was not the man to leave another, guilty though he was, to be roasted. He grasped the prostrate man by the heels, and ran out to the street with him.

The crowd cheered him lustily, thinking he had saved a life instead of arresting an incendiary.

When he reached the sidewalk in front of the store with his prisoner, the latter was permitted to rise to his feet. The moment he was well planted he aimed a blow at Dick, taking him under the ear when he was not looking, and sending him to grass in the presence of a thousand people.

Then he tried to dart away through the crowd; but the spectators were so indignant at his attack on the man who had saved his life, as they believed, that they promptly arrested and held him till Dick regained his feet, which he did in another minute.

Instead of wasting precious time on the villain, Dick sung out to those in charge of him:

"Hold on to him! He is an incendiary!" and then went on with his work as foreman of the hook and ladder.

After desperately battling with the fire for over an hour it was subdued, though the bulk of the merchandise was destroyed, or so badly damaged as to amount to the same thing.

The arrested man proved to be one of the partners in the store, a stalwart fellow, by the name of Wattles. His reputation for honesty was none of the best in Dunkirk, and when it was discovered that a large insurance on the goods in the store had been effected only a week before the fire, everybody believed him guilty of having set the fire going. He was marched off to jail, and Dick returned with Liberty hook and ladder to their head-quarters.

The next monday he appeared before a magistrate in proceedings against Nick Wattles, whom he charged with throwing oil on the fire in the store.

His evidence caused his committal, and as the prisoner was led out of the court-room he passed within three feet of the young fireman, to whom he hissed through clenched teeth:

"My friends will fix you for this, Dick Decker."

Dick laughed and asked:

"Have you got any friends?"

"You will find out to your cost," was the hissing reply.

"I should like to know them," retorted the young fireman.

The prisoner was carried past him, and nothing more was said at the time.

"You had better be on your guard, Dick," said one of his friends, who heard what passed between them. "He has friends as desperate as himself, who might seek to get even with you for this."

"I don't think I have any cause to fear them," replied Dick. "I have done nothing but my duty, and if they will give me fair play, I wouldn't mind tackling all his friends."

"But they won't give you any show at all. Such men never give any one a fair show."

"I'll take my chances with them," and the young fireman and his friend passed out together. He went back to the factory where he was employed and went to work again.

CHAPTER II.

DICK RESCUES A MANIAC FROM DEATH.

THE hall over the engine-house was the place where the firemen resorted to every evening, to read the papers and talk over the news of the day. The place was kept neat and clean, and visitors were frequently welcomed there to spend a social evening with them.

On the Monday evening, following the Saturday afternoon fire, many of the members of Liberty Hook and Ladder were assembled in the hall over the engine, when Dick Decker, their popular young foreman, entered.

They were discussing the threat made by Wattles in the court-house that morning, and some of them were in favor of advising Dick to arm himself.

"Nick Wattles came from New York," said one of the members, "and his associates there are very bad men. Somebody in New York is interested in the Wattles' store here in Dunkirk. The insurance is for thirty thousand dollars, which is supposed to be about double the amount of goods in the house at the time of the fire. That insurance can never be collected in the face of Dick's evidence. So you see, it will be worth thirty thousand dollars to them to get him out of the way before Wattles is tried."

"Yes, that's so!" exclaimed a half dozen at once. "Dick ought to go armed so as to protect himself."

"Here comes Dick now!" cried Ben Wilson, the sub-foreman of the hook and ladder company.

"Hello, Dick! We have been talking about you!" said one of the party. "What are you going to do about the threat Wattles made against you in the court-room this morning?"

"Nothing, except to put a head on the friend of his who interferes with me. That's all I can do."

"Don't you know it's thousands of dollars in their pockets to get you out of the way before the trial comes off?"

"Yes; I suppose it is, but they'll have a sweet time getting me out of the way, I guess," and he laughed good-naturedly as he spoke.

"Still, they could shoot you down or stab you to death almost any night if you are not prepared for them, you know."

"Well, if they undertake that little game, there'll be a funeral soon after, and I'm quite sure I will not be the corpse," he rejoined, and the whole party laughed and cheered him, for he was the most popular member of the company.

While they were talking the great fire bell struck.

Ding-dong! Ding-dong!

The first note seemed to work like magic on the firemen.

They sprang to their feet and flew down-stairs as though the roof of the building was falling in.

They seized the pole and long rope and dashed out of the house with the truck, as though shot out of a mortar. Dick was at their head with fireman's hat and red shirt on, trumpet in hand, leading the way down the street at break-neck speed.

The fire was in a large building four stories high, on a corner of a street. The smoke seemed to burst from all the windows at once, and was a dense volume.

"Up with the ladders!" cried Dick, through his trumpet, and in another minute the tall ladder was up against the wall.

Two women appeared at one of the windows.

A man at the foot of the ladder ran up with the agility of a squirrel and caught one of them in his arms.

"Be careful! Steady now, Ben!" cried Dick through his trumpet, and the brave young sub-foreman acted on his advice as coolly as an old veteran could have done.

The other woman, seeing she was left behind, commenced climbing out of the window.

"Don't jump! Don't jump!" cried hundreds of voices at once.

"Wait! wait!" sung out the trumpet, and the next moment Dick was flying up the ladder.

He met Ben Wilson in midair, coming down with a woman in his arms.

The long, slender ladder swayed to and fro with the weight of three, and the multitude held their breath in anxious suspense as they watched the two daring firemen, wondering how they would pass each other on the ladder.

Suddenly, just as Dick reached Ben Wilson's feet, he crawled between the rungs and hung by his hands until Ben had safely passed below him with his burden.

A shout like the roar of the sea in a storm greeted the daring act, and then Dick ran up the ladder, and seized the terror-stricken woman in his arms just as she was about to leap to the ground.

Steadily he held her with his good right arm, and with his left he held on the rungs in his descent.

To make a misstep at that height from the ground would be fatal to both; hence the care he took in the descent.

The moment he reached the ground a roar of applause greeted him. The woman was taken in charge by her friends.

"There's a man in there!" cried a score of voices in the crowd.

Dick looked up, and saw a man waving his hands wildly at one of the windows on the third floor of the building.

"Steady, men! Stand by to help!" cried Dick, and the next moment he was running up the ladder again to the third story.

When he reached the window the man had disappeared from view.

"Here's help! Come to the window!" Dick shouted.

He waited but a moment, and getting no response, plunged through the window in a dense black volume of smoke.

"Good God! He will be lost!" cried a voice in the crowd below.

A minute, which seemed an hour to the anxious multitude, passed, and then he reappeared at the window with the limp, inanimate form of the man in his arms.

A shout went up.

"There he is! There he is! Hurrah! hurrah! Be careful, Dick!"

The brave firemen below joined in the cheering as Dick crawled out of the window with his burden and commenced the descent.

The man was heavier than his rescuer, hence he was not so easy to handle as the two women had been. But Dick was both brave and strong. He held onto the rungs with one hand and to the man with the other.

But when about two stories above the ground, the man, who had been unconscious up to that moment, suddenly recovered consciousness.

He began to try to get loose from Dick, who held on to him.

"Be quiet, or we will both fall," said Dick to him.

"Fall! Fall!" exclaimed the man. "Who said fall? We'll go up instead of down—up in beautiful flame and smoke! Ha, ha, ha! Yes—up, up in flame and smoke! In flame and smoke—ha, ha, ha!"

"Be quiet, I say!" sternly retorted Dick, tightening his grip on him, for he thought the man had not fully recovered his wits.

"Hands off! Hands off!" the man screamed, loud enough for those below to hear. "Let me go! Hands off! Ha, ha, ha! You fiends think to deceive me, but you will not. Let go, I say!"

"By the stars!" exclaimed Dick, to himself. "I've caught a downright crank, who is as crazy as a loon!"

"Ha, ha, ha! Fire! Fire!" screamed the crank, waving his arms and kicking wildly with his long legs. "Flame and smoke! Hands off, fiend!" and then he suddenly turned and grasped Dick by the throat with both hands, choking him till his eyes stood out on his cheeks.

Dick was amazed at the suddenness of the attack, and fully conscious of the danger. To let go the rung of the ladder to defend himself, would be but to court death for both in a fall to the pavement below.

"Ugh! Ough—och—arr-r!" he gasped, in his efforts to shake him off.

But the lunatic held on all the more, and yelled:

"Hands off! Up we'll go in flame and smoke! Ha, ha, ha!"

Desperately Dick struggled with the maniac. The whole world began to whirl round with him, and lights flashed through his brain, and he felt that he was slipping from the ladder by degrees.

Suddenly he released the maniac and grasped the rung of the ladder with both hands, leaving him hanging solely by the grip on his throat.

The maniac hung down through the rungs of the ladder, holding to the daring fireman's neck.

Not until that moment did the crowd below realize the peril of their young foreman.

"Let him drop! Let him drop!" cried the firemen below, as they gathered under the ladder to catch either of them should he fall.

By a desperate effort Dick shook him off, and the howling maniac dropped down in the midst of the firemen, who caught him in a way that saved him from breaking any bones.

Frank had presence of mind enough to cling to the ladder till he recovered his strength and breath. Then he commenced the descent amidst the cheers of the multitude.

When he reached the ground he asked of Ben Wilson:

"What have you done with that crank?"

"The police have got him."

"He came near getting away with me—never had such a close call in my life."

"He was howling when he dropped down on us," said Ben. "He whooped, howled and laughed, saying we were all going up in flame and smoke."

"That's what he said to me, and then went for my wind-pipe, shutting off my wind completely."

"We saw him but didn't know what was up. Guess he started the fire up there."

"No doubt of it."

There were no more people in the building, and the fire was extinguished before the house was destroyed.

But that Dick saved the maniac's life at the fire, as well as the woman's, no one who witnessed his daring could gainsay. He and Ben Wilson returned to the head-quarters of the engine the heroes of the hour.

But the young foreman had been so badly choked by the crank that he was compelled to go to his quarters and send for a physican.

The doctor came and applied remedies which relieved him so much that he was able to go to his work at noon the next day.

But his neck was quite sore for several days, and he was ordered to keep up the treatment the doctor had prescribed.

CHAPTER III.

THE OLD MAID'S "DARLING"—THE ATTACK.

THE story of the maniac and his rescue by the daring young foreman of Liberty Hook and Ladder, at the peril of his own life, was the theme of the Dunkirk papers for several days after the fire.

The man had suddenly become insane, and from his mutterings it was inferred that he set fire to the building in order to go up in "flame and smoke," as he said he would when he began his struggle with Dick on the ladder.

He was adjudged a dangerous lunatic, and sent to the asylum for the insane a week or two after the fire.

In the meantime Dick had recovered from his injuries and was at the engine-house almost every evening in the week. The boys indulged in recounting the dangers of the fire service, and related hair-breadth escapes without number.

But Dick never once spoke of his heroic deeds, unless questioned by someone in quest of information; then he spoke modestly, and never bragged of his work.

One evening the fire-bell rang out the alarm of fire, and the engine and hook and ladder were promptly on hand.

The fire was in an old frame building in the lower end of the town, occupied by two old maids—sisters, who were supposed to be very rich.

The building was like a tinder-box. The flames spread so rapidly that it soon became evident that it could not be saved from total destruction.

The two sisters had managed to get out of the house in time to save themselves. But one of them had left her pet poodle-dog up-stairs in her bed-chamber.

"Oh, my poor darling! My poor darling!" she cried, wringing her hands in great distress. "Oh, will no one save my poor darling?"

"My God, madam!" exclaimed our hero, "I didn't know any one was in the house! Which room? Which room? Speak quick, or it will be too late!"

"In that room up there! That corner window!" replied the old maid, wringing her hands and crying as if her heart would break.

Up the ladder he flew like a hero bent on periling life to save life.

He reached the window and kicked the sash in. Then he plunged in through a dense volume of smoke and felt all round the room.

"Anybody in here?" he called.

No answer.

He could not remain there long.

The heat and smoke were too much for him.

Turning to leave the room ere he fell from suffocation, something struck against his foot.

He stooped and caught it up in his arms, and then climbed out on the ladder again.

The object he had in his arms was a small poodle-dog, a fact he did not discover till he was half-way down the ladder, so blinded was he with smoke and cinders.

When he did make the discovery, he threw the dog from him with an expression of disgust.

One of the firemen caught it, and its weeping mistress sprang forward, clasped it in her arms, covered it with kisses, and said:

"Oh, what a hero he is!" and then turned and rejoined her sister, carrying her pet in her arms.

"My God!" groaned Dick, as soon as he reached the ground; "I was nearly suffocated. I couldn't find anybody in there. I picked up a dog without knowing what it was."

"Dick Decker," said Ben Wilson, "that dog was the darling she was making all that fuss about. You have saved an old maid's darling."

"Eh? What's that?" demanded Dick.

"That dog was the darling."

"The dog?"

"Yes."

Dick gave a groan, and felt like lying down on the ground and let the property be consumed without making another effort to save anything. He was too mad to speak, hence he did not say anything.

But when he went back to the engine house the boys roared over the joke. He did not enjoy it much, for he had come near losing his life by suffocation in saving the animal.

"It's one of the many perils of a fireman's life," remarked one of the members. "We must take it as we find it—the bitter with the sweet."

"Yes—but where does the sweet come in when you risk your life for an old maid's poodle dog?"

"Marry the old maid," remarked another, amid the roars of the company.

"Excuse me, if you please," said Dick, dryly. "I'd never marry a woman who keeps a poodle dog."

On the Sunday following the last fire, Dick was on his way to the engine house, where he expected to meet Ben Wilson and take a ride out in the country, when he was accosted by a stranger.

"Excuse me, sir, but is your name Decker?" he asked.

"Yes, that's my name," he replied, coming to a halt to see what the man wanted.

"I have heard a great deal of you as a fireman, a man, and first-class factoryman, Mr. Decker, and as I am the owner of two factories, I want to make you a proposition looking towards becoming your employer. As this is Sunday, you may not care to discuss the matter to-day, but if you will come to my room in the hotel to-morrow, we can talk the matter over to our satisfaction."

"What is your name, sir?" Dick asked, after the man was through speaking.

"My name is Turner—Abner Turner, sir—here's my card;" and he gave Dick his card, which read simply: "Abner Turner, Fall River, Mass."

Dick glanced at the card, and then asked:

"Are your factories in Fall River?"

"Yes, both of them."

"I don't know that I care to leave Dunkirk, sir. I am doing very well here, and——"

"Wait till you hear my offer, Mr. Decker. If I make you an offer that will double your present income, you would not refuse it, I presume?"

"I can't say that I would. But I don't see how you can make such an offer in the present state of trade."

"No, because you don't know anything about it yet. Will you come up to my room at the hotel to-morrow evening—say at nine o'clock?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right, then, I won't detain you any longer now. Will look for you punctually at the hour."

"I will be on hand," remarked Dick.

"Good-day, then."

"Good-day, sir."

Dick went on his way to the engine-house, where he met Ben Wilson, and had his ride in the country with him.

He said nothing to Ben about the offer Turner had made him. He concluded to wait and see what the offer amounted to before saying anything about it to any one.

Accordingly, he met Turner at nine o'clock, as agreed, and was received with great cordiality.

"Have a cigar, Mr. Decker?" said Turner, offering him a fragrant Havana cigar, which Dick took.

"It's very close in here, Mr. Decker," remarked Turner. "Suppose we take a walk, and smoke and talk business at the same time?"

"That's a good idea. I dislike being cooped up in a small room."

They lit their cigars, and started out on a walk—going out beyond the suburbs.

They talked business and smoked.

Turner made him a brilliant proposition, and he was on the point of accepting it, when a man sprang out from behind a hedge and dealt him a blow on the head with a club that laid him senseless on the ground.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ATTEMPT AT MURDER.

As he went down Dick lost consciousness, and darkness and oblivion ensued.

The man who dealt the blow stepped forward and raised the club to strike again, when Turner darted away, saying:

"Whist! Someone's coming!"

The would-be assassin lowered his club and sprang after Turner as fast as his heels could carry him, both running along the hedge till they struck a street that ran at right angles with it.

Two men came along on foot without having seen or heard the two villains.

One of them stumbled over the body of the young fireman.

"Hello!" he exclaimed. "Here's a dead drunk!"

"That's so, by hokey!" returned the other. "He seems to be pretty full, too. Let's get him on his feet again."

"All right. Say, old man," and the man shook him vigorously by the shoulder, "get up here, and get along home with you."

Of course the shaking nor the words had no effect on the young fireman at the moment. The stunning blow came near fracturing the skull, and left him in utter unconsciousness.

Then they both took hold of him and tried to stand him on his feet.

"I say, Ned, this man isn't in liquor!" exclaimed one of the two men. "I don't smell any liquor about him."

"Neither do I. What can be the matter with him then?"

"Hanged if I know. Is he alive at all?"

"Yes—he's warm."

"So he is."

But he was as limp as a wet rag for all that, a fact that greatly troubled the two good Samaritans.

"I say, old fellow," one cried, giving the unconscious fireman a good shaking, "what's the matter with you?"

"Eh?" gasped Dick, in a dazed sort of way.

"What's the matter with you?"

"Eh? Eh?"

"Where do you live?"

Dick looked from one to the other, though in the darkness he could not see the features of either. Nor could they see who he was.

"What's your name?"

He raised his hand to his head and felt of the back of it, as if he felt a pain there.

"Does your head hurt you?"

"Yes," he muttered, and then he looked around in a dazed sort of way, as though trying to gather his wandering wits.

Suddenly he asked:

"Who hit me?"

"Did anybody hit you?"

"Yes," and he put his hand to the back of his head again.

"Somebody hit you on the head?" one of the men asked, placing his hand on the back of his head. Then, without waiting for an answer he jerked his hand away, saying:

"By Jove, Ned! His head is all bloody behind! There's been foul play here."

The man addressed as Ned put his hand up and took it away covered with blood.

"Hanged if you aren't right, Tom," he exclaimed.

"Yes, I know I am. What's your name, sir?"

"Dick Decker," was the reply.

"What! Dick Decker, the fireman?"

"Yes."

"Good Heavens, man, what does this mean, anyhow?"

Dick was now pretty well himself again, so far as his wits were concerned. He gave the points to the two men in a few words, and then they started to lead him to a drug store to have his wound dressed.

When they reached the nearest drug store, the man called Ned hastened off to inform the police of the attempt at murder, in order that the man Turner might be apprehended when he arrived at the hotel.

But nearly an hour passed ere the police reached the hotel. Then the officer found that Turner had settled his bill a half hour before and left.

"Mizzled!" said the officer, and then he started on a run to the depot, hoping to head the fugitives off as they took the train.

But there he was too late again. The train had been gone fifteen minutes, and nobody recollected particularly who got on or off.

The officer then went to the drug store to see Dick, and get a description of the man Turner from him.

Dick gave a good description of him, but the other man he knew nothing about, as he only saw a dark form, and then felt the bloody bludgeon on his head.

He was then carried to his room, and the news of the murderous assault on him spread through the town like wild-fire. Many of Liberty Hook and Ladder men came and tendered their services as nurses, if such were needed.

"It is the result of Nick Wattles' arrest," said Ben Wilson. "That fellow Turner is one of his New York chums who are going to make good his threat if they can. By the Lord of Dunkirk! if Liberty's men get their hands on him, they'll save the country the expense of a trial!"

"Yes, yes! We'll hang him!" cried several at once.

"Oh, just let us catch the scoundrels!"

"Hanging would be too good for them! They ought to be burnt!"

"We will burn 'em if we get a chance!"

A score of other threats of a similar character were made by the excited firemen. Had the would-be assassins fallen into their hands that night they would have been hung to lamp-posts, and with but little ceremony.

The next day all Dunkirk heard of the murderous attempt on the life of the young fireman, and everybody sympathized with him.

The mayor offered a reward for the capture of the villains, and the police were enjoined to be vigilant in their efforts to run them down.

The surgeon said that, from the nature of the wound, he was satisfied that it was the intention of the rascals to kill him instantly, but his hat prevented a fracture of the skull from the first blow.

"I never had the least suspicion of Turner," said Dick to Ben Wilson and a party of firemen who were in his room the next evening. "He seemed so honest and frank in his way that I would have gone anywhere with him."

"We told you to look out, Dick," said Ben, shaking his head. "We knew they were laying for you, because Wattles didn't make his threats for nothing. They have too much at stake."

"Well, this is the first time I was ever downed," remarked Dick, "but I think it will be the last. I will be on my guard hereafter, and give 'em a taste of their own soup."

"That's right. The next time they may not depend on a club, but resort to a bullet or knife."

"They would probably have used a bullet this time," remarked one of the party, "had they not feared that a discovery would result therefrom."

"That's just what I think, too," added Ben Wilson. "Good Lord! how I'd like to get at 'em with a six-shooter!"

Ben and Dick were bosom friends ever since they knew each other, and this attack on his foreman aroused all the fire of battle in the young sub-foreman.

It was nearly a week ere Dick could get out of his room, and about ten days ere he could resume work in the factory.

His first appearance in the hall over the engine-house was the signal for a wild applause of welcome from the other members. They gathered around him, shook hands with him, and in every way showed their gratification at having him with them once more.

Luckily there were no fires during the next two weeks, and the young fireman had a good rest. But the outrageous attempt on his life was the talk of the town during the whole time. The police were vigilant in their efforts to ferret out the perpetrators of the crime. They were left to work in the dark, however, as they could not start any clew as to their whereabouts after leaving Dunkirk.

The detectives in New York were sent among Wattles' former associates in that city, but nothing whatever could be learned, nor could they find any one who answered the description of Turner.

"He must have been well disguised when here, then," said Dick. "But I think I will show them what a fireman can do it they try it on me again."

CHAPTER V.

THE TWO VILLAINS—ANOTHER FIRE.

LET us now return to the man Abner Turner, who came so near leading Dick Decker to his death in the suburbs of Dunkirk.

On hearing the sound of footsteps approaching the spot where the young fireman had fallen, Turner whispered a word of warning to his accomplice and darted away.

The other quickly followed without repeating the blow that had felled the victim to the ground, and together they ran alongside the hedge till they were out of sight of the two men who came along.

"Perdition!" hissed Turner, as he stopped and listened. "They have found him and are talking to him!"

"Yes—and they think it a case of dead drunk," added the other.

"Then I hope they will leave him there," remarked Turner.

"There! They have found out it is not a case of drunk! One of 'em said it was foul play!"

"Then we must get away from here! I must go to the hotel and get my valise away before he can recover enough to give me away. Why in blue blazes didn't you use an iron bar and thus settle him once for all? We have got all the work to do over again now!"

"I thought this loaded club would be sufficient," said the other. "He must have an uncommon hard head on him to get over the blow I gave him."

"Well, you see how it is. Stay where you are stopping. You will not be suspected. I'll change my make-up, and go to the Blue Inn Tavern."

Turner then left his companion and hastened back to the hotel, which he entered and called for his bill.

"I have just received a telegram," he said to the clerk at the desk, "and must catch the next train for New York."

The clerk made out his bill and received the money. Turner then passed up to his room, packed his valise, and came down with it, saying to the clerk:

"I will walk down to the depot and wait for the train."

The clerk bowed to him, and he passed into the street.

Down the street a little distance, he turned and entered a narrow alleyway, where he put down his valise, and proceeded to make a complete change in his general appearance.

Opening his valise, he took therefrom a change of clothes, a wig and beard, all of which he put on correctly, dark as it was.

Then he put into the valise the things he had discarded.

After that he went near the depot, just as the train came thundering along. Then he mingled among the passengers, and pretended to have come on the train.

"This way to the Blue Inn, sah!" called out a darky, who was drumming for the Blue Inn.

"Yes, that's my place," said Turner, handing his valise to the darky, "and I don't care how soon you take me there."

"All right, boss; hab you dar in no time, sah."

The darky gathered two more passengers, and then started the stage for the tavern.

When they reached the blue inn, he registered in an assumed hand as "James Wright," and claimed to hail from Boston.

It was not very late, yet he pretended to be both tired and sleepy, and retired to his room, where he went to bed and slept till morning.

After breakfast Wright went out and called on Joe Murray, who was stopping at the Derby House on another street.

Murray was the man who had used the club on the fireman the night before. He was looking for Wright, but did not know in exactly what shape he would come.

"All right, Joe," said Wright, as he came up and took his hand.

Joe recognized the voice as Turner's, and was relieved of all further anxiety in regard to the situation.

"No danger, you think?" Murray asked, as he shook hands with him.

"None in the least."

"The town is greatly excited."

"Yes, but what does it amount to?"

"Not much, it's true; yet if they only get the nippers on us it would be all over with us."

"So it would; but we are not going to let 'em do that. He is laid up for a fortnight at least."

"Yes. Sorry I didn't succeed."

"So am I. Better luck next time."

"What shall we do now?"

"Watch our chance to fix him."

"We have got to be very careful."

"We ought to be that anyhow."

"True. We shall not be suspected."

The two men walked about town the next day and smoked fine cigars, talked with citizens about the attempt on the life of the young fireman on the evening before.

They were astonished at the intense feeling displayed by the citizens over the attempt at murder, and felt that it would indeed be all one with them if they were to fall into their hands.

"We must move very slow and cautiously, Joe," said Wright, "and bide our time. It's three months yet before the trial of Nick comes off, so we will have ample time for our work."

"Yes—if we don't get dropped on before that time," remarked Joe.

"It will soon blow over. I am going to make his acquaintance so as to disarm him of any suspicion, and lead him out again so you can make a sure thing of it next time."

"Oh, I'll make a clean job of it the next time."

Wright and Murray went into several saloons and drank beer and listened to the talk about the all-absorbing topic. Then they went over to the Blue Inn and had dinner together.

Thus a week passed, and the two men made many acquaintances in Dunkirk. They proved to be "good fellows," and received invitations to join in many amusements and excursions, all of which they accepted, and conducted themselves properly, to all appearances.

Another week passed, and the young fireman was at his post again, both in the hook and ladder company and in the factory.

One evening Wright received an invitation to visit the hall over the engine from one of the members.

He accepted, and was introduced to Dick by someone present.

The young foreman received him cordially, and talked with him quite awhile.

Ding-dong! Ding-dong! went the great fire bell, and every man sprang to his post.

"I'll go with you!" cried Wright, throwing off his coat and seizing a fireman's hat, of which there were several extra ones in the room, and taking a position with the boys. "I used to run with the machine in Boston, and it comes quite natural to me to take hold once more."

The blast from the trumpet in Dick Decker's hands started them, and away they ran like an avalanche.

The fire was over one of the heavy business houses on one of the main streets of the city. It had begun in the second story, and soon made rapid progress to the third and fourth floors.

The top floor was occupied by the family of the janitor—a wife and three children.

Of course the rapid spread of the flames caught them all where they were, and when the hook and ladder truck reached the ground they were all at the windows, screaming for help.

"Up with the ladder!" cried Dick, through the trumpet.

The tall ladder went up alongside of the house, and Dick was the first to spring forward.

He ran up like a squirrel and brought two little girls down in his arms. They were small, but had sense enough to cling to him till they reached the ground.

Ben Wilson ran up, passing under the ladder when he met Dick coming down, and rescued the mother of the children.

Then the father ran down the ladder by himself, more demoralized than any of his family.

Suddenly the mother recollected that her eldest daughter was still up in the building. She set up a scream:

"Oh, my child! my darling Mamie! She will be lost! Save her! Save her!"

"It isn't a dog this time, is it?" Dick asked.

"No—my child! my daughter!" shrieked the mother. "Oh, save my child!"

Both Ben and Dick sprang up the ladder. The prospect was bad for Mamie. The hot smoke was pouring out through each window in dense volumes.

Both men climbed through the window.

"Search this room, Ben!" cried Dick, "and I'll go to the others."

Dick then darted away from Ben's side, and went in search of the poor girl.

Ben found her in less than ten seconds, and passed out of the window with her, leaving Dick still in the building. He reached the ground in safety, and was received with deafening cheers.

"Where's Dick? He'll be lost!" cried several of the firemen, as they saw the fire increasing and no signs of him at the window.

"Look! Look! The ladder is on fire!"

A tongue of flame shot out of one of the windows and touched the ladder. Heated almost red-hot, the ladder blazed up and was soon in a sheet of flame.

It was removed, and another was ordered to be put up at once.

"Quick, boys, Dick is in danger!" cried Ben Wilson; "up with the other one, quick!"

But the other one caught in the telegraph wires which ran along in front of the building, and had to be lowered again.

The suspense was awful.

The brave fireman seemed to have met his fate at last.

Suddenly a yell burst from the multitude below.

Dick shot out of the third-story window headforemost—like a boy diving—and caught on the telegraph wires twenty feet from the pole and thirty from the ground!

CHAPTER VI.

THE LEAP FOR LIFE—A TERRIBLE STRUGGLE.

THE scene was simply indescribable when the brave fireman made the flying leap.

The people on the street below grew perfectly frantic in their enthusiasm over his daring feat and escape from a horrible death.

All interest in the fire was at an end. Everybody wanted to see the brave young fireman get safe to the ground again.

"Up with the ladder to the wires!" cried Ben Wilson, and a ladder was put up against the wires almost against Dick's head.

He caught one of the rungs, and swung himself round so as to get a good position. Then the crowd yelled again, and when he began to descend, the cheering was simply wild and uproarious.

At last he reached the ground.

The first man to grasp his hand was Wright, who had been working with the boys like an old veteran.

"Decker!" he exclaimed, wringing his hand, "you are a hero! Wilson found the girl and brought her out."

"Ah! I am glad of that!" exclaimed Dick. "I was afraid she was lost!"

The firemen crowded around to congratulate him on his escape from death by roasting.

"To your posts!" he cried. "Talk when the fire is out!"

Every man sprang to his post.

But there was little for them to do, as nothing more could be saved. They could only prevent the spread of the fire to other buildings, which they did.

The fire extinguished, Liberty Hook and Ladder returned to their quarters, and Dick laid down on a bench and rested himself. He felt the immense strain of his leap for life from the building to the wires.

"When I returned to the window," he said to a score of red-shirted firemen around him, "and found the ladder down, I thought it was all over with me. I was nearly roasted, to say nothing of suffocation by the dense black smoke. I looked down, and knew that to jump to the ground meant death. To remain where I was would be worse. The wires seemed to say, 'Come to us,' and I ran back into the room to get a good running start for the plunge. As I went through the window I mentally prayed that I might catch the wires. It was the closest call I ever had in my life, and don't want another like it soon, if I know myself."

"It was a tremendous leap," remarked Ben Wilson.

"Yes," said Wright; "when a man leaps for his life, he is apt to put a good deal of force into his spring."

"You are right," remarked a third.

"Of course I am—that's my name," and there was a laugh all round.

The boys praised Wright for his excellent aid at the fire, and something was said about making him an honorary member of Liberty Hook and Ladder.

"I shall esteem it the highest honor ever conferred on me," he said, when it was whispered in his ear.

The next day Wright and Joe Murray were together again in a well known popular saloon.

"Yes," said Murray, "I say it was the most daring thing I ever saw in my life."

"And you saw it, eh?"

"Yes, I was in the crowd."

"Well, I'm going to join his company, and I think I can get you in, if necessary."

"Not necessary," said Joe. "One of us must be on the outside. I'll stay outside. You go in."

"Very good."

They called for beer, and sat at the table some time in quiet conversation, when Wright asked:

"What have you got for the next attempt, Joe?"

"A knife and the same club."

"You are sure it will be enough?"

"Yes."

"Very well. I shall watch my chance to get him out for a ride or walk soon."

Several more days passed, and no more fires occurred in the city to call the brave fire-laddies into service.

Dick had called on both the two young ladies, Minnie Cranston and Nellie Smith, with whom he was introduced to the reader in the opening chapter of our story, and had been cordially received by both.

One evening he was returning home from the factory when he saw a half-drunken young man run up against a girl.

There were a score or more of factory girls on the street going home from work.

The young lady seemed to be very much frightened, and tried to get away from the fellow, who appeared to be trying to detain her against her will.

Dick ran up, and found the young lady to be Nellie Smith.

"Oh, Dick!" she exclaimed, running up to him; "drive that man away, please."

"Here, you fellow!" called Dick to the man, "you are annoying this young lady. Be off with you, now, or it will be the worse for you!"

The man stared at him in surprise, and then said:

"You talk too--hic—big, you!"

It was Murray, the accomplice of James Wright.

"I am as big as my talk," said Dick, swelling up with an itching desire to punch his head.

"Oh, Dick!" exclaimed Nellie, in a tremor of excitement, "come away. Don't quarrel with him."

Dick turned away and darted down the street with the young lady, when another girl, some distance behind him, cried:

"Oh, run for your life, sir!"

Something moved him to look around, and he saw Murray rushing on him with a drawn knife in his hand.

Quick as a flash he sprang aside, and dealt him a tremendous blow under the ear as he did so, sending him to grass as neatly as any prize-fighter could have done.

Of course Nellie screamed, and the girls began to scatter in every direction.

Murray rose to his feet in a furious rage.

He had been drinking, and now thought this as good a time as any other to do the work he was hired to do.

The blow had partially sobered him, and now he ran at his intended victim again with more coolness than in the first instance.

But Dick was not to be caught that way. He was on his guard, though he had no weapon with him but an ordinary pocket knife.

Dodging again, he gave him another blow that staggered him backwards several paces.

Then Dick followed it up with another, hoping to down him and then disarm him. But the man seemed to get his second wind, for he rallied, more furious than ever, and made another dash at the brave young fireman.

Dick was nimble as a squirrel, and kept out of the way of the knife, giving his foe a blow here and there as chance offered him.

At last, furious from repeated blows, Murray rushed in and clinched with him. At the same time Dick struck his foot against a stone and both fell to the ground, the would-be assassin on top.

CHAPTER VII.

A BATTLE FOR LIFE—SHOT IN THE DARK.

THE fight in the street naturally drew a crowd of spectators to the spot. The shop and factory girls ran a little distance to be out of any possible danger, and then stopped to gratify the natural curiosity of their sex.

When Dick went down with Murray on top of him, and the murderous-looking knife gleamed in the air, a shudder of horror passed through the crowd.

Some of them would have ran to his assistance before that had they thought he really needed it. They started to do so, when they saw the knife gleaming above him.

But they were not needed.

As he went down his right flew out and came in contact with a loose cobble-stone as large as a cocoanut. Quick as a flash he seized it and struck Murray full in the face with it, with such force as to forever spoil his beauty.

The desperate villain tumbled backwards as though shot through the heart. The knife fell from his hand, and Dick arose unharmed, just as a policeman came up and arrested him.

Murray was all broke up.

He was marched off with Dick to the station-house, and a surgeon sent for.

"Oh, captain!" cried a sweet, girlish voice, rushing up to the desk of the captain of police, "let me tell you how it all happened. I saw it all, and Mr. Dick is not to blame; indeed, he is not."

"Who are you, miss?" the polite official asked of the young lady.

"I am Nellie Smith, and live on Orange street," she said. "I was walking along the street when that brute of a man came up and insulted me. I ran to Mr. Decker and claimed his protection. He told the man to go away, but the brute fell to abusing him, and then the fight began. The man drew a big murderous-looking knife and swore he would kill him, but Mr. Decker knocked him down several times, and had to strike him with a stone to save his own life."

"I am not a judge to try the case, miss," said the captain, "but you have won it nevertheless. You ought to be a lawyer or a lawyer's wife. Your client is discharged on condition that he appear before the mayor to-morrow to make charges against this man."

Nellie blushed crimson as the crowd cheered her and Dick. The brave young fireman turned and offered her his arm to lead her out of the station house. She took it and they went out together.

"Why, Nellie! how brave of you to go in there as you did!" he exclaimed, when out on the street.

"How could I do otherwise?" she asked. "I was the cause of it all, and I was not going to leave you to be locked up all night for protecting me from insult on the street."

"You are a brave, good girl, Nellie," he said. "I don't know how to thank you for what you have done."

"It's me that should thank *you*," replied she. "So I do that with all my heart."

"Well, we both did our duty, and that's enough for us. I hope you won't feel any ill effects from the excitement."

"Oh, I am not one of the fainting kind," she said, with a merry laugh. "As long as neither was hurt, it's all right. Do you know who that bad man is?"

"No. Never saw him before that I remember. He has gotten himself in a bad fix."

"What will they do with him?"

"Don't know. I am not a lawyer, you know. You ought to know, as the captain——"

"Oh, for mercy's sake don't mention it that he said I ought to be a lawyer!" she cried, interrupting him. "I shall never hear the last of it from the girls."

"It will be sure to get into the papers to-morrow morning."

"Oh, can't it be stopped?" And her look of blank dismay caused Dick to burst into a jolly fit of laughter.

"No," he said. "Nothing can stop it. Your fame and fortune

will be made to-morrow. Counselor Nellie Smith is henceforth one of the bright and shining lights of the Dunkirk bar."

He escorted the young lady to her home and parted from her at the gate.

"Oh, mamma!" she cried, rushing into the house, "such a terrible thing has happened!" And she told her mother the whole adventure. The very matter-of-fact mother blessed Dick Decker and laughed at her fears.

On his way back up-town Dick met James Wright, his secret enemy and accomplice of Murray, who had just heard of the affair from one of the firemen.

"Hello, Dick!" exclaimed Wright. "You have had your usual luck in getting out of a tight place!"

"Yes—I didn't get a scratch," replied Dick. "The fellow had a big knife, and came near getting away with me."

"Why didn't you kill the rascal?"

"Because I didn't think it necessary. I don't want to kill anybody if I can help it."

"But you would have been justified in doing so. He evidently tried to kill you if all I hear is true."

"I believe so myself, but then he was drunk. Who was the fellow?"

"His name is Murray. I know him well. He is a good fellow when sober, but a bad one when drunk."

"Where is he from?"

"New York, I believe."

"Well, he has made a mistake in getting drunk and insulting girls in Dunkirk. Our people won't have it."

"Of course not. He would not have done such a thing for his right arm had he been sober. They say he is badly hurt."

"I guess he is. He got a heavy cobble-stone full in his face."

Wright went on his way, and Dick repaired to his room. For several minutes after leaving Dick, Wright swore like a pirate in an undertone.

"The blessed fool," he exclaimed, "has spoiled the whole business by his drunk, and got himself into trouble besides. He will have a hard time in getting out of this scrape. If he doesn't get six months I am greatly mistaken in my calculations. I will have to get somebody to take his place. What in blue blazes did Nick Wattles mean by putting a lush to work up such dangerous business for, anyhow? In another week I could have had Decker in the right place to finish the job," he continued. "Now it's all up till I can get another man in his place. Hanged if don't wish the cobble stone had finished him on the spot! He ought to be killed for a fool on general principles."

The arch villain returned to his hotel, nursing his wrath against his pal for his blunder. Dick, on the other hand, ate his supper, and then went round to the engine house to meet the firemen and receive their congratulations.

"Why didn't you kill him?" Ben Wilson asked. "That's the only way to serve such fellows."

"Don't want to kill any man if I can help it," replied Dick. "I guess I gave him enough. The law can give him the balance."

Wright came in and joined in the denunciations of Murray, saying:

"I knew him when he didn't drink, and he was considered a good fellow by all who knew him."

"Well, he has come down from all that through drink," said one of the party, "and must suffer the consequences, as the law does not allow drunkenness as an excuse."

"That's so!" chorused the whole company of firemen.

"I wonder if he is not one of the Wattles crowd?" one of them asked.

Wright started as if stung.

"Oh, he can't be!" exclaimed one of the firemen. "When he spoke to the lady he didn't know that Dick was within a mile of her."

"No," said Dick, "he didn't dream that any one was about to interfere with him. He was just drunk enough to be reckless, and didn't care a cent for the consequences."

"That's just what I think, too," put in Wright, who dared not be too bold in defending his pal. "He was drunk, and that's all there is of it."

Soon after Wright shook hands with several of the boys, and left the engine-house to go to his hotel, he said.

Dick remained for over an hour talking and laughing over the adventure, and then took leave of them to return to his room.

Out on the street he sauntered along, looking up at the silent stars, thinking them not half so bright as pretty Nellie Smith's eyes, when he heard a low whistle in a dark alleyway on his left.

Thinking it a signal from one of the boys, he went into the alley, and started to go through when a dark form rose up before him, and the next moment a revolver flashed in his eyes, the burning powder and stunning report sending him staggering back as if struck by a thunderbolt.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MYSTERIOUS SHOT—A BURNING FACTORY.

For a moment or two Dick was completely dazed by the suddenness of the attack. As he was trying to recover his balance he heard footsteps running down the alley, and then the thought occurred to him that his assailant was escaping.

He was armed with a revolver, and, drawing it quickly he fired it down the alley, and then started in pursuit.

But swift of foot as he was, he was unable to overtake the would-be assassin. Still he could hear him running, and, to make sure of doing something he fired the second and third time. But the bullet went wide of the mark each time, as he soon came to the end of the alley, which ended in another street, without having seen anything more of him.

The shots brought people out of their houses, however, and policemen and other citizens ran forward to see what caused them. Dick was found considerably excited and quite blinded from the effects of burning powder in his face and eyes.

"What's the trouble now, Dick?" a policeman asked.

"Some man thrust a revolver right in my face and fired!" he exclaimed. "I don't know but that I am hit. Lead me to a drug store. I am in great pain."

He was led to a drug store, when the discovery was made that he was disfigured by burning powder. A surgeon declared that both eyes were safe, but that it was a narrow escape from total blindness, if not death.

"See here," said the doctor, pointing to a lock of hair that had been clipped by a bullet; "an inch further to the right and the ball would have lodged in the brain."

Of course this second attempt to murder the brave fireman aroused the utmost feeling in Dunkirk, and indignation was freely vented in the streets and in the public press.

Dick made up his mind after that to go thoroughly armed so as to be ready to defend himself at a moment's notice. The police could get no clew to the assassin, as Dick could give no description of him, hence nothing was done toward arresting him.

A few minutes after the shooting James Wright entered his hotel and passed up to his room, where he closed the door and sank down into a chair.

"Failed again!" he muttered, "and came near losing my own life in the bargain. His bullets whistled uncomfortably close to my head as I ran down the alley. Hanged if I don't believe the fellow bears a charmed life. I was within three feet of him and felt sure the bullet had taken him between the eyes. But I made a lucky escape, and am not suspected. I will try it over again, and see if a third attempt won't do something."

He went to bed and slept till a late hour the next morning. Then, after a late breakfast he strolled out on the street to see what news he could pick up in regard to the adventure.

He soon found out that no particular person was suspected. No one had been seen about the alley previous to the attack, hence a profound mystery hung over the crime.

That a conspiracy to slay the young fireman now existed in Dunkirk no one now doubted. The firemen swore to lynch the guilty parties if caught, and the police said they would not interfere to prevent them if they caught the rascals.

In the meantime, Dick was laid up for a few days in his room from the effects of the burnt powder in his face and eyes.

Ben Wilson came to see him.

"I'll get even with those rascals yet," Dick said. "They'll keep on till I kill some of them, and then we'll find out who they are."

"But you must be more than ever on your guard, Dick," said Ben, "as they may get away with you the next time they try it on."

A week elapsed, and Dick was again at his work in the factory, and at the engine-house of evenings. The marks of powder remained on his face in little bluish spots, and bid fair to stay during life.

One day while he was hard at work in the factory, the great fire-bell rang out an alarm.

Ding-dong! Ding-dong! Ding-dong!

It always struck terror to the hearts of some people whenever they heard that great bell strike. They knew it told of some terrible danger somewhere in the little city—that probably someone was at that moment roasting to death in the fierce heat, or suffocating in the dense smoke.

The moment Dick heard the first note, he dashed out of the factory at the top of his speed, hatless and coatless. In less than three minutes he was at the engine house, donning hat and red shirt. Then he dashed away at the head of Liberty Hook and Ladder boys, clearing the way with loud blasts on his trumpet.

The fire proved to be in a hat factory, where a large number of young girls were employed. All those on the two first floors succeeded in getting out; but on the third and fourth floors the poor creatures crowded to the windows and cried piteously for help.

Their thoughts seemed to be on the gallant fireman, who had saved so many lives at other fires in the city, for they called out:

"Save us, Dick! Don't let us die!"

"Up with the ladders!" rang out from the trumpet, and Liberty's boys responded with a will.

One of the ladders went up to a window, and Dick went up like a squirrel.

"Here's Dick Decker!" cried one of the girls, as he reached the window. "He will save us!" and some of them burst into tears as they saw him.

Dick climbed into the window and glanced around to see just how the fire was. The large room was full of smoke, and a sheet of flame was coming up the stairway, cutting off all retreat by that route.

No time was to be lost.

"Here, girls!" he cried, "you must go down the ladder. Keep cool. Your safety depends on that. Keep a good grip on the rungs of the ladder till you reach the ground. If you let go you will fall and be dashed to pieces. Here, now, little rosebud," and he caught hold of a little fifteen-year-old rosy-cheeked lass, "you may go first," and he assisted her out of the window, and saw that she was started right before he let her go. Then, as she made her way down the long ladder he started others, and in a couple of minutes more he had a dozen girls going down amid the cheers of the firemen and other spectators.

But there were a dozen more inside to follow, and the flames were getting nearer and nearer to the trembling girls.

"Be quick, girls!" he cried, in clear, ringing tones; "but be careful. Don't get excited!"

"Oh, I'm just roasting!" cried a young girl, jumping up and down in nervous excitement.

"Tut, tut, little one," said Dick. "You look sweet enough to eat without roasting. Just keep quiet now, and you'll go down into that crowd and find a young man there who will take you right off to the minister."

Some of them laughed at his jest, but others cried with terror. The roaring flames were crowding them, and the dense smoke made it nearly impossible for them to breathe and live. But he stood calm and cool in their midst, and started them, one at a time, down the ladder.

At last but one girl remained on that floor with him. She was a tall blonde, who betrayed not the least particle of fear or excitement during the whole time.

"Now, miss, it's your time!" he called out to her. "Come! let me assist you out to——"

"No, not now!" she said, very coolly, "there are thirteen girls on the floor overhead. Get them down and I will go."

"How, in God's name, can I get at them?" he exclaimed, looking around at the red volume of flame ascending the stairway.

"There's a door in the floor in that corner," she said, pointing to the end of the room, "where they let bales of goods down. Knock the bolt loose and they can jump down to this floor."

Dick saw the feasibility of the plan at once. He ran to the corner, seized a bar and knocked the bolt out.

"Here, girls!" he cried, in a loud voice, "come here and you can get down."

The girls made a rush for the trap-door, and stopped on seeing no ladder there for them.

"Jump, and I will catch you!" he called, and a plump little miss of some fourteen summers leaped down into his arms without a moment's hesitation, and then the others followed.

The tall blonde girl ran to the ladder and assisted them out of the window, as she had seen Dick do.

When Dick returned to the window with the last of the girls he found that the blonde had gotten them all safely down the ladder.

He put the last girl out of the window and then turned to the blonde.

"Now, my brave heroine, it's your time. Come, we have not a moment to lose."

Just as she started toward him an immense tongue of flame shot forward and encircled her slender waist like a fiery serpent.

She gave a wild shriek and sank down to the floor.

"My God!" exclaimed Dick, "such a girl shall not die!" and he sprang forward, caught her in his arms, and bore her to the window.

He saw that she had fainted.

Placing his trumpet to his lips he shouted to the firemen:

"Play on us, quick!"

Then he climbed out on the ladder, and the firemen saw that both his and her clothing were on fire.

CHAPTER IX.

A BRAVE GIRL—THE FIRE-LADDIES' TRIBUTE.

A WILD cheer arose from the crowd below as soon as they saw him with the intrepid blonde in his arms. They had seen her calmly helping the other girls out of the window, and knew that she was the heroine of the hour.

But they were both on fire.

As he descended with her in his arms, the hoseman turned the stream of water on them, and in a few moments they were both drenched to the skin.

Slowly he descended.

The water had the effect to restore the blonde to consciousness.

She soon realized that he was descending the ladder with her in his arms.

"I am too heavy," she said; "let me get hold of the ladder, and I can go down by myself."

"We are nearly down now," he said, "so be quiet, like a good girl, and we'll soon be on the ground."

When he reached the ground the dozen firemen sprang forward to relieve him of his burden.

"Throw an overcoat over her," said Dick, "or she will take cold. She is the bravest girl I ever saw."

The firemen cheered both, and the next moment a big, warm, dry overcoat was thrown over her shoulders and around the tall blonde. She remained as cool and calm as the most veteran of all the firemen, and did not fail to smile her thanks to the man who threw the overcoat over her shoulders.

A policeman came up to her and asked her where she lived.

She gave him her address.

He called a carriage and placed her inside, telling the driver to take her to the number and address given.

Frank was scorched in several places, and huge blisters soon appeared.

He went to his room and sent for his doctor, who came and dressed his burns. They were very painful, and the doctor said he would not be able to go out for several days.

The news of his heroic rescue of the girls in the factory created a deep sympathy for him throughout the town. Every day large bouquets of flowers were sent to his room by ladies in different parts of the town.

"Ben," said Dick to his sub-foreman one evening, "I want you to hunt up that young lady—the tall blonde who helped me at the fire. Find out who she is and give this bouquet of flowers from me."

"Her name is in all the papers," said Ben. "Her name is Nora Norcross. She worked in the factory, and is the daughter of a widow on State street."

"Will you go and see her for me?"

"Of course I will, and be glad of an excuse to do so."

"See here now, mate!" cried Dick, "don't take advantage of me because I am down on my back. Wait till I am up again, and then let the best man win."

"Oh, yes, of course," and the little party laughed heartily when

Ben took the flowers and started out on his mission to the widow Norcross' house.

He had no trouble in finding the house, and a knock on the door brought the mother to the door. She was surprised at seeing a red-shirted fireman there with a large bouquet of flowers in his hand.

"This is where Mrs. Norcross lives?" he asked, doffing his hat.

"Yes, sir," she answered. "Will you walk in?" and she held the door ajar for him to enter.

"Thanks, ma'am. I came to inquire how Miss Norcross is and to leave this bouquet for her from Mr. Dick Decker, who is down on his back with his burns."

The mother's eyes filled with tears.

"Oh, sir, you are so kind!" she said. "My daughter is in bed, too, suffering from her burns."

"I am very sorry to hear that," said Ben. "We firemen are going to make her an honorary member of our company, as we think her the bravest woman that ever lived."

"I—I—I——" and the mother burst into tears.

She idolized her daughter, who was all she had in the world to love or live for.

Ben looked around the room and saw that the widow and her brave daughter were very poor. But everything was scrupulously neat and clean, and a few articles gave evidence that they once saw better days.

"Excuse me, ma'am," Ben said, "but have you a physican for your daughter?"

"Oh, yes, sir. The owner of the factory sent his own family physician to attend her, and he says she is doing well."

"Can I see her?"

"I will go and ask her."

She left the room, and Ben waited till she returned.

"She says she does not feel strong enough to see any one to-day," the mother reported, "but hopes to be able to both see and talk to you to-morrow evening, if you will be so kind as to call then. She wept tears of joy over the flowers, for they are a passion with her. Please accept her and my thanks for your kindness, and also convey them to Mr. Decker."

Ben rose to his feet and bowed himself out, charmed with the mother of the brave Nora.

"Yes," he said to himself, as he walked up the street, "I will be sure to call to-morrow evening, and bring a bouquet on my own account."

On returning to Dick's room, he found half a dozen of Liberty boys there.

"Boys," he said, "they are poor, and must feel the loss of pay during the girl's illness. They have seen better days, and the mother is a highly educated lady. The daughter must be so, too. I suggest that we make up a testimonial sum of money and send it to them."

"Good! put the thing!" chorused the entire party.

Then everyone present subscribed the amount he was willing to give and the fund was started. Several agreed to raise more on the next day, and then separated.

When they met again the next evening the sum of three hundred dollars had been raised. It was placed in an envelope with a card on which was written:

"From Liberty Hook and Ladder Boys.

"A tribute to beauty and bravery."

Then Ben and a committee of two others were sent to present the fund to Nora Norcross.

They found her in bed, propped up with pillows.

That same sweet smile was on her face as they entered the room.

Each man carried a large bouquet of flowers in his hand.

"Oh, what beautiful flowers!" she exclaimed, her large eyes beaming with joy.

"Allow us to present them to you, Miss Norcross," said Ben. "Our boys have sent us here to pay their tribute to you," and he handed her the bouquet he held in his hand, in which was stuck the envelope with the money in it. The other two likewise tendered their bouquets.

"How can I ever thank you, gentlemen?" she exclaimed.

"By getting well as soon as you can," replied Ben; "and appear at our parade with us, as an honorary member."

"Have you indeed made me a member of your company?" she asked.

"No, but we are going to do so at our next meeting," replied Ben.

"I shall be so proud of the honor."

"So will we—the proudest men in the world!" responded one of the firemen.

They took leave of the mother and daughter, and left them to examine the contents of the note in secret.

"Now, mother," said Nora, as soon as they were gone, "please put these flowers in water for me. They are so fragrant and beautiful."

"Why, here's a note in one of them!" exclaimed Mrs. Norcross, taking up the envelope and holding it up; "and there's something in it, too!"

Opening it, the card and roll of bills dropped out into her lap.

"Mercy on me!" gasped the widow, picking them up. "Just look at this, daughter—three hundred dollars sent to you as a present from the brave fire-boys!"

Nora's eyes stared.

She could scarcely believe she was not dreaming. But the tears of joy that rolled down her mother's cheeks soon satisfied her that it was not a dream. Then she, too, wept tears—tears that were sweet to one like her. She had so long yearned for sympathy among her companions, but they considered her proud and haughty, and so kept aloof from her.

"A brighter day is dawning for us, my child," said her mother; "for now we can open a shop of our own, and——"

"Oh, mother, don't say anything about cold, matter-of-fact business now," pleaded Nora; "let me lie and dream of all that this act of kindness suggests. I am more than happy to-night, mother. These burns no longer pain me. I—I——" And the happy maiden wept again, and seemed so full of sweet thoughts that her mother arose and left her to herself.

Ben Wilson went back and reported to the fire boys, and then they proceeded at their next regular meeting to elect Nora Norcross an honorary member of Liberty Hook and Ladder Company for gallantly assisting to save human life at a fire at the imminent peril of her own.

Two days after the election a knock at his door caused Dick to call out:

"Come in!"

The door opened, and a man whom he did not know entered the room.

The man glanced quickly around the room to see if any one else was present. His eyes gleamed with a savage triumph as he darted toward the bed, without uttering a word, and drew a formidable knife from his bosom.

Dick quickly sprang out of bed, getting the bed between him and his assailant, and thrust his hand under the pillow for his revolver.

CHAPTER X.

THE UNKNOWN ENEMY—THE NEW DODGE.

THE moment Dick caught sight of the face of the stranger, something seemed to tell him that he was in danger. He could not account for the feeling, yet he acted upon it the very instant he saw the man thrust his hand in his bosom to draw the knife concealed there, and sprang to the other side of the bed. At the same time his right hand sought the revolver that was under his pillow.

"Halt where you are!" he exclaimed, as he cocked and aimed the revolver at the man's head, "or you are a dead man!"

The man was utterly paralyzed at the sudden change in the situation, and stood rooted to the spot like one in a dream.

"Don't shoot!" he gasped, turning as pale as death. "It's all a mistake!"

"Yes, you made a mistake in supposing that I was helpless and unarmed," said Dick, still aiming the weapon at his head.

"No, I—I—was after another man," faltered the visitor.

"Who were you after?"

"I won't tell—I—I will go away," and he turned and darted out of the door before Dick could pull the trigger on him, and bounded down the stairs a half dozen steps at a time.

"By the great guns!" exclaimed Dick, when he found himself alone again, "that was the boldest thing yet! If I had not got my hand on this shooting-iron! Sorry I didn't give him a bullet in his back as he turned. He was disguised. I could plainly see that; but who he is puzzles me. His voice seemed a little familiar, and yet I can't suspect. They are after me, and no mistake. I shall have to

give orders to let no one in until he sends in his name. Then I won't be taken by surprise."

He placed the weapon back under the pillow and crawled into bed again, feeling sore from the sudden exertion in getting out as he did.

But he cared little for that.

He had taught his enemies that he was still able to protect himself, and that was something he was proud of.

"I won't say anything about this," he said to himself, after a few minutes' reflection, "as some people might not feel inclined to believe it. But I will hold myself in readiness to give a blue pill to the next one who tries it on me. I'm getting tired of this thing; it's getting monotonous. The next one will be the head of a funeral procession, or my name is not Dick Decker."

When the physician came an hour later, he found Dick in a high fever, and thought a nurse a necessity.

"You must have a nurse, Dick," he said. "Someone who will stay here all the time to give you medicine and protect you from intrusion."

"I am willing, doctor," he replied, "but who can I get?"

"There are five hundred ladies in Dunkirk who would volunteer their services," said the doctor, laughing.

"But I don't want a female nurse just yet, doctor."

"No. We'll see if we cannot get a man to stay here with you. I'll speak to the boys about it this evening."

That evening the doctor went to the hall of the fire engine and asked for a nurse for Dick for a few days.

A dozen men at once tendered their services.

They were all workingmen, but that mattered not. They would gladly leave their work to nurse their daring young leader back to life and health again.

Finally one young man, who had no family to support, was selected, and he went at once to the room where Dick was confined, to enter at once upon his duties.

Time passed, and Dick came out again healed of his burns and as strong as ever he was. The boys of Liberty Hook and Ladder received him with open arms.

His first duty was to pay a visit to Nora Norcross, and see how she was getting on.

She received him with the cordial dignity of a refined young lady, and congratulated him on his recovery.

"Thanks," he said; "I called to congratulate you, Miss Norcross, and not receive congratulations myself. I am truly glad to see you up again. I think you have suffered more than I did."

"I hope you were not as badly burned as I was," she remarked.

"I don't know that I was. We are both up again and out of danger, unless we have another fire; and now I must congratulate you on becoming a member of our company."

She laughed, and said:

"I hope I shall not be required to run to fires with the company?"

"Oh, no. All we require of you is the promise that you will not marry outside of the company."

She burst into a merry laugh.

"Surely I can promise that, Mr. Decker," she said. "Do the other members have to make such a promise?"

"Oh, no."

"Then why be so hard on me?"

"Because we want to make sure of keeping you in the company."

They laughed and chatted merrily for over an hour, and Dick came away with the impression on his mind that she was indeed a girl of great mental and personal charms.

Back again in the factory at his work, Dick was more than ever on his guard against his secret enemies. He was suspicious of every stranger with whom he came in contact, and would not go anywhere with one unless a personal friend was along with him.

One night a burglary was committed in the city, and much valuable property stolen. A fine gold watch and chain, together with a diamond cluster ring, were among the things stolen.

A few days later one of the detectives received a package through the post-office. In it was some of the stolen property and a letter, which said:

"I return to you my share of the things taken from Judge Elmore's house last week, as I am told by one of my former pals that unless I do so I am likely to get into trouble. I have had troudle enough, and don't want any more. If you will go to Dick Decker's room and search his trunk, you will either find the watch, chain and ring, or the pawn tickets for them. I don't wish to do him any harm, so will say no more about him."

There was no name signed to the letter. The package contained several articles of very valuable jewelry, which the detective recognized from the description given to him by the owner.

But the letter was a puzzler.

It implicated Dick Decker in the burglary, and was evidently written by an educated person, as every word was correctly spelled and written.

"Dick had nothing to do with it," said the chief of police, when the letter was shown to him. "That is a very lame attempt to injure the gallant fireman, and it won't work. Go and show him the letter, and hear what he has to say about it."

The detective waited until the young fireman had finished his day's work in the factory, and met him on the street as he was going home.

"I say, Dick," said the detective, "I have something here for you to read," and he gave him the letter.

He read it through very carefully, and then looked up at the officer and asked:

"Did any one at police headquarters believe this?"

"Not one," was the prompt reply.

"I am glad to hear that. If those things are in my trunk, they were put there without my knowledge—to injure me in the community."

"Of course; we all understand that."

"Come to my room now, and let's see if those things are there as the letter says," and they both went together to his room and searched the trunk.

Sure enough, they were found concealed in a corner, wrapped in one of his socks.

"Bob," said Dick, his face turning ashen white, "hereafter I shall be as merciless as the man-eating shark to those men who have been trying to ruin or kill me."

"They don't deserve any mercy at your hands, Dick," said the detective. "Shoot 'em down the first time they show their hands. Nobody will blame you for it."

"Blame or no blame, I will give the undertakers something to do when I get a clew to their identity."

"Which you have not as yet?"

"No. I have do idea who they are. Heretofore I have cared but little about 'em. But henceforth I am on the war-path."

"Whenever you want my assistance just let me know," said the detective, "and you shall have it."

"I know that, Bob; but I won't need it. Something tells me that I will yet get my revenge for all this."

"I hope you may," and the officer turned and left the room with the articles in his possession.

"That settles it!" hissed Dick through his clenched teeth, as he glared around the room. "If they can't remove me before Nick Wattles is tried, they will try to blacken my reputation, so as to break down my evidence against him. It won't work. I'll get in some fine work on 'em myself that will make 'em sick."

The detective went back to the chief of police and made his report.

"I knew it was a game that was being played on him," said the chief. "Dick will have heavy bills against somebody some day, and he'll collect with a strong hand, too, when he commences."

"Yes," said the detective; "he was the maddest man I ever saw when he found the watch and ring in his trunk. He said he would make 'em sick when he got a clew to them."

"Which I hope he soon will," the chief remarked.

"So do I, for a truer man than Dick Decker never lived."

"He'll catch up with them after a while."

"I think so, too."

"Strange he has not done so before this."

"Yes—time will work it, though."

CHAPTER XI.

DICK FINDS A SHADOW.

THE attempt to ruin his character as an honest man aroused all the lion in the young fireman. He could forgive everything but that. He

swore a big round oath that he would run the scoundrels to cover and mete out to them the punishment they so richly deserved.

But he concluded to say nothing about his resolve to any one, lest it get to the ears of the villains and put them on their guard against him.

It took him several days to make up his mind as to how he would proceed in his pursuit of the men who were seeking his life. But he came to a conclusion at last, and that was to resolve to go in disguise, and pretend to believe in Wattles' innocence, and denounce the young fireman for arresting him at the fire.

"That may cause some of his friends to look upon me as a man of their stripe," he said, "and by that means I may be able to get into the secret of their attempts to get me out of the way. To do that, however, I shall have to get a month's leave of absence from the factory. I'll see if I can't get a man to fill my place there for a month, and then there'll be no trouble about it."

Having resolved on that course, he went in search of a man to take his place in the factory for a month or six weeks. The proprietor of the factory agreed to let him off on that condition.

In two days he found a man that could fill his place, and then he informed the firemen at the engine-house on the following evening that he had a month's vacation.

Of course they all congratulated him on his good fortune.

"Where will you go to spend the vacation, Dick?" Ben Wilson asked.

"Oh, I may run out of town for a few days," he said, "but the most of the time I shall spend right here on my back, taking all the rest and quiet I can."

"Sensible to the last!" exclaimed an old fireman. "Excursions are a bore instead of recreation. Take off your coat, light your pipe, and loll back in an arm-chair and read a book or paper. That's the cream of a holiday rest."

The boys laughed, and one said:

"And that's the way a lazy man enjoys it."

"No, sir. A lazy man, who shirks his work all through the week or month, does more hard work on a holiday when he goes on an excursion than at any other time. The man who does honest work sits down and enjoys his rest when he gets a holiday."

Of course there were different ideas all round, but the boys laughed and cracked jokes, each man having his own opinion as to the best way to enjoy a holiday.

A day or two after he put his substitute to work in the factory Dick took a train for New York, intending to go to a first-class costumer and procure a disguise that would completely swallow up his identity.

When he took a seat in the car he noticed a man who took the one behind him. There was nothing particular about the man to attract his attention, but the moment Dick caught a glimpse of him the thought flashed through his mind that the man might be shadowing him.

"If he is I will turn the tables on him," he muttered to himself, "and shadow *him*. I've got nothing else to do and may as well do that as anything else."

When the cars reached the city, Dick went out and took a down-town street car. The man did the same thing, and Dick was more than ever convinced that he was being shadowed. To fully satisfy himself, however, he got out and took another car.

The man did the same thing.

"Oh, you're my shadow, are you?" he muttered. "Well, if I don't make your shadow thin before I get done with you, my name is not Dick Decker, that's all."

Dick had on old schoolmate who was a barkeeper in a down-town bar-room. He and Jack Hare had been boon companions in their youth, and Dick knew he could trust Jack in an emergency.

He resolved to call on Jack, though he had not seen him in a year. He rode down-town till he was in the vicinity of Jack's place. There he got off.

His shadow did likewise, and followed him into the bar-room, where Jack was mixing drinks for a thirsty crowd.

"Hello, Dick!" cried Jack, as he caught sight of the young fireman.

"Hello, Jack, old fellow!"

They both shook hands across the bar, and inquired after each other's health and prospects.

"I've heard of you several times, Dick," said Jack, "through the newspapers. You've made a hit out at Dunkirk."

"Well, I don't know as to that," replied Dick, "but I am doing well, and have plenty of good friends out there of whom I am very proud."

"Glad to hear that. What'll you have, sir?" and Jack turned and asked the shadow who had come in and leaned up against the bar, as if waiting to be waited on.

"Bourbon whisky, if you please," replied the man.

"What are you drinking now, Dick?" Jack asked, as he set the bottle and glass upon the counter.

"Lemonade to-day, Jack," said Dick, and Jack proceeded to make a glass of lemonade for him.

The shadow drank his whisky, and did not appear to notice our hero or any one else in the place. He paid for his drink and then turned to a table, picked up a paper and pretended to read.

By and by the barkeeper was idle for a few minutes, and Dick whispered to him:

"Jack, I want to see you privately a few minutes."

"All right. Go into that little back room and wait for me."

Dick went into the little rear room, and waited some ten minutes ere Jack got a chance to join him.

"What is it, Dick?" he asked.

"I am shadowed," returned Dick. "I am a witness in a case involving thirty thousand dollars insurance. They want to get me laid out so I can't be on hand. The shadow is that man with the slouch hat on in the bar-room there. I want you to get me a man who will shadow him and slug him. I will pay all the racket."

"Why not slug him yourself?"

"Because it would get me in trouble—the very thing I want to avoid just now."

As Dick was speaking a man entered the front door of the saloon and marched up to the counter with a swagger.

Jack peeped through the inner door, and then whispered to Dick:

"Here is the very man. Hard-fist Tom wouldn't like anything better. Wait till I see him."

Jack went behind the bar.

"Hello, Tom! what is it?"

"The same old thing, Jack, me boy," said the bully.

Jack gave him the drink he always took, and whispered to him:

"Step in back. I want to see you."

Tom walked back, and Jack followed close at his heels.

"Tom," he said, "this is my best friend, the boss fireman of Dunkirk. Shake!"

The bully gave his hand to our hero, saying:

"Jack's friend is my friend, yer understand?"

"Ditto," returned Dick.

"Tom, Dick is shadowed. That chap with the slouch hat on," whispered Jack. "I want you to lay him out when Dick goes around Ben Sellers' corner, which he will do when he leaves here. Dick will then get away. Then you must have this chap shadowed, and see where he goes and who the crowd is."

Tom nodded his head and smiled.

A minute or two later he went out and arranged with one of his associates to be on Sellers' corner and shadow the man he should knock down there. When he returned he passed into the little back room and told Dick that he was ready to go to work.

"Very well. Go to the corner and wait till I pass. Then go for him when he comes along. Here's a ten dollar bill."

"Don't want it," said Tom. "I am flush now. Keep it till I am dead broke again."

"Very well. I never go back on a friend."

"But it there pard!" and Tom stretched his hard palm toward our hero, who grasped and shook it warmly.

Then he passed out of the saloon.

Two or three minutes later Dick passed out also, after shaking hands with Jack.

The shadow arose, lit a cigar, and strolled out also.

Dick turned toward Sellers' corner, and the shadow turned in the same direction.

But when the latter came to the corner, Hard-fist Tom stepped up and planted a blow under his left ear that laid him out on the pavement as though a thunderbolt had struck him.

CHAPTER XII.

TURNING THE TABLES—AN AWFUL PERIL.

WHEN the shadow rose to his feet he glared around like one in a dream.

He knew who hit him, but the man was nowhere in sight.

Hard-fist Tom had "mizzled."

So had Dick Decker.

The shadow turned to a half dozen roughs on the other corner and asked:

"Who hit me?"

"Garibaldi," responded one of the party, at which the others laughed.

He saw that he had no friends in that crowd, and so started off uptown, one of the party following him.

In the meantime Dick, relieved of the shadow at his heels, repaired to the costumer he came to the city to see, and there secured a disguise that enabled him to defy recognition by even his most intimate friends.

Thus secured against his enemies, he made his way back to Jack's place, where he intended to wait until he could hear from the man Hard-fist Tom had set to shadow the man who had been knocked down.

When he went in he found Hard-fist Tom sitting at a table smoking a cigar and looking over the papers. In front of him was a glass of Bourbon whisky, of which he took a liberal sip every minute or two.

He took a seat at the table opposite the bully, and asked:

"What will you have, Tom?"

Tom stared at him in surprise.

"Say, what'll you have?"

"Gimme yer name, to start on," said Tom, very suspicious.

"My name is Dick Decker, but you want to call me Jim."

"Blast my two eyes!" gasped Tom, tumbling to the racket at once. "Yer got it up fine, pard!"

"Yes, and you got him *down* fine. Let me thank you for the handsome way you downed him," and Dick shook hands with him across the little table. "Now, say what you will have, and we'll have it."

"I take the same thing all the time, pard," he said, "whisky straight."

Jack came round to the table and failed to recognize Dick till Tom called his attention to him and told him who he was.

"Good!" exclaimed Jack; "your own mother wouldn't know you."

"That's just what I want. I am after those fellows and am going to put 'em right through."

"Count me in on that, pard," said Hard-first Tom, who had now taken a fancy to him.

"Yes, of course, for you are just the kind of a man I want. I like a man that will stand by me in a scrimmage."

Tom is the man to stand by a friend," said Jack, as he filled the order the young fireman had given him.

They waited two hours to hear from Tom's man, and then concluded that he had a long chase on hand.

"Fred will follow him to kingdom come," said Tom, with a determined shake of the head.

"It's Fred Harris, is it?" the barkeeper asked of Tom.

"Yes."

"Then you may rest assured he'll run him to cover, Dick," he said.

"He may have gone back to Dunkirk," remarked Dick, "and in that case you had better come out there, Tom, to-morrow."

"I'll stay here till I hear from Fred," Tom said. "I told him to meet me here, and he'll do it."

"Well, I'll go back to Dunkirk. When you hear from him let me know. I will be at the Dunkirk House under the name of Jim Langley."

"Enough said, pard," said Tom. "I'll be thar when I hear from him."

Dick then shook hands with Jack and Tom, and left the saloon.

Three hours later he was back in Dunkirk, registered at the Dunkirk House as James Langley.

The first man he saw there that he knew was James Wright, who had changed to that hotel. Of course he did not make himself known to him, but waited for a chance to get acquainted.

That night, as he was sitting on the piazza of the hotel, listening to the conversation going on among a dozen guests, the great fire bell struck.

Ding-dong! Ding-dong! Ding-dong!

"That's fire!" exclaimed Wright, who seemed to be unusually excited.

Every man on the piazza sprang to his feet. Some ran out on the street and others stood on the steps and gazed in every direction for the fire. But the quiet, middle-aged man, who sat apart from the others, and who had arrived on that afternoon, was seen to leap to the ground and dart away like an arrow, disappearing from sight in an instant.

It was Dick Decker, the young fireman, and as he ran he stuffed wig and beard into his coat pocket.

When he burst into the engine room, the boys hailed him with a rousing cheer. In another moment he had on his red shirt and fireman's hat.

Then he dashed out at the head of the men, trumpet in hand, and led the way down the street.

Everybody gave way to the brave firemen, and in a few minutes they were at the fire.

The house was a tall, four-story residence, belonging to one of the wealthiest families in Dunkirk. When it was known that Judge Morgan's mansion was on fire, all the people in that end of town rushed forward to see it.

The hook and ladder boys were the first on the ground, and had one of their tall ladders up ere the stream of water was turned on the fire. Several inmates were taken out by Dick and Ben Wilson.

Suddenly Miss Eugenie Morgan cried out that her cousin, Alice Henderson, was still in the house.

"Which room was she in?" Dick asked, turning to the young lady.

"She was in the same room with me, and ran out before I did. Oh, do please save her!"

Dick sprang up the ladder and plunged into the room, which was now a furnace of flame and smoke.

"Alice—Alice!" he called.

But he received only a crackling, hissing reply from the flames.

Dashing out of the room, he found himself in a corridor, with great tongues of red flames leaping madly about, and hissing like so many venomous serpents. He knew at a glance that the young girl had not gone *down* the stairs in the face of that intense heat.

"She must have gone *up* the stairs," he said, and up the stairs he flew, clearing a half dozen steps at a bound.

On the top floor he found every room full of smoke and deserted.

"My God!" he exclaimed. "She may have plunged down the stairs after all, and been burned to a crisp by this time!"

He had no time to waste.

The flames were following him so savagely that he was forced to rush to the roof through the scuttle.

When he passed through he was astonished at seeing Miss Henderson there on her knees, praying only as an innocent young girl could pray under such circumstances.

"Miss Alice!" he called.

She sprang to her feet and stared at him like one in a daze.

She recognized the fireman's hat and red shirt.

"Saved! saved!" she cried, clasping both hands in ecstatic joy.

Dick glared around him and wondered how in the world he was going to save her. The ladder could not reach to the roof, and it was now utterly impossible for him to go below, for the red flames were now coming through the scuttle with a roaring, crackling noise.

Looking about him again, he saw the clothesline used by the family. Then he looked at the young girl again.

"How much do you weigh?" he asked.

"One hundred and twenty pounds."

"Then you can be let down over the side of the house," and he began gathering the line. It was so small that he concluded to double it so as to make sure of its strength.

Rushing to the edge of the roof, he sung out through his trumpet:

"Move ladder to south side!"

Then he turned to the young lady.

"You must let me tie you round the waist and let you down to the ladder, where they will take you down to the ground."

She was very pale.

But she was a brave little woman.

"You know what is best," was all she said, and then he put the cord around her slender waist.

"Now keep cool and you will soon be all right," he said to her.

Looking over to see if the ladder was in the proper place, he told her to climb over and trust to him.

She gave him a look he never forgot, and then deliberately stepped over the edge of the roof.

He held on and let her down steadily till she reached the ladder.

Ben Wilson was there to receive her.

He took her in his arms.

Dick knew she was safe from the slack in the line and the great shout that came up from the people below.

"Come down! Come down, Dick!" the multitude yelled to him.

But how was he to get down?

True, he still had the line in his hands, but was it strong enough to bear his weight? He doubted it.

At last he concluded to try it.

"Better fall crushed than to roast," he said, as he began to tie one end of the line around the chimney.

Then he crept over the roof and began sliding down.

He could feel the line stretching—giving away. Then a wild cry of horror went up from the throng, and Dick Decker believed his doom was sealed.

CHAPTER XIII.

A NARROW ESCAPE—THE PLOT THICKENS.

THE moment was one of extreme peril to our hero.

He hung suspended to the slender line which was secured to the chimney, and when he was some eight or ten feet above the ladder, a sheet of red flame shot round the chimney and fastened to the edge of roof right where the line passed over it.

The crowd saw that another minute would decide the fate of the brave fireman, and so a groan of horror escaped them.

Dick heard them, and knew that some dire calamity threatened him.

He looked up, and saw his danger.

His safety lay in reaching the ladder ere the flames severed the cord.

He loosened his grip on it till he slid down to the ladder, blistering his hands as though the cord had been a red-hot bar of iron.

The moment his feet touched the ladder the cord parted and dropped down on his head.

But he was safe.

The crowd yelled with delight.

He drew a long breath of relief and turned to descend to the ground.

"It was a close call, Ben," he said to Wilson, as he reached the ground. "Take the ladder away before the wall crushes it."

"Yes; I thought you were gone up that time."

"I am good for a great many fires yet," he said. "Did the girl get down unhurt?"

"Yes—except the cords chaffing her round the waist."

"Oh, that's nothing."

The house had so much inflammable material in it that the firemen could not save it. It proved a total loss—to the insurance companies. The family were glad enough to escape alive and find a refuge with neighbors, who threw open their doors to them.

The heroic rescue of the young lady on the roof and his own narrow escape again made the young fireman the topic of conversation throughout the city.

Judge Morgan sent him an open letter of thanks, as did his pretty niece, Miss Alice Henderson.

The next day Dick, disguised as James Langley, returned to the Dunkirk House, and sat around among the guests as quiet as on the evening before.

The guests were talking about the fire and the incidents that occurred there.

"That fellow Decker seems to be quite a hero among the firemen of Dunkirk," remarked one of the guests to another.

"Yes," was the reply, "and he deserves all that can be said in his praise. I was here three months ago, when a fire occurred at which he saved the lives of nearly a score of people at which time he was badly burned himself."

"Indeed! He must be a real hero."

"He is—at least the good people of Dunkirk think so, anyhow."

"Yes," said Wright, who was sitting near by, "I was here at the time of that fire, and saw his gallant rescue of the girls."

"Do you know him?" the stranger asked, turning to Wright.

"Oh, yes. He is one of my best friends. I visit the engine-house and hook and ladder's rooms quite often. He is very popular with all the members. None of them appear to be jealous of his popularity."

"What kind of a man is he socially?"

"Oh, he's a good fellow. Everybody likes him. He's a fast friend, and true as steel."

Dick felt grateful to Wright for his remarks in his praise, and mentally resolved to thank him for it some day.

Just a minute or two later something happened that greatly surprised him.

A man came up and shook hands with Wright, and the two passed into the bar-room of the hotel together.

As they passed into the light that came from within he was startled at the revelation that dawned upon him.

The newcomer was the shadow whom Hard-fist Tom had knocked out in New York the day before.

To make sure that he was not mistaken; he went into the bar-room and bought a cigar. There he obtained a good look at him.

"Yes, it's the shadow," he mentally commented, "and he seems to be an acquaintance of Wright's. I wonder who he is, and why he is after me? If Hard-fist Tom was here I'd ask him some hard questions. As they don't know me in this make-up, I will swing onto this and see where it leads to. His presence here shows that he hasn't given up his job."

Wright and the newcomer exchanged a few whispered sentences at the bar over their drinks, and then went up-stairs together to the former's room.

As they passed up-stairs Dick noticed a man, quite well-dressed, closely eying him.

Something told him that he must be Fred Harris—the man Tom had set to shadow the shadow.

So sure was he that his surmise was correct that he went up to him.

"Hello, Fred!" he exclaimed, tapping him familiarly on the shoulder.

Fred wheeled around and stared at him with a puzzled expression of countenance.

"I don't know you, sir," he said.

"But I know *you*, Fred Harris," retorted Dick. "You have run your man to cover. I saw him go up-stairs just now. Come and have a drink with me!"

"Who be you, anyhow?" Fred asked, without moving a step.

"I am the man you and Hard-fist Tom are working for."

"Oh, you be, eh?"

"Yes, I am Dick Decker," and Dick whispered his name to Fred.

Now Hard-fist Tom did not have time to give Fred any particulars when he engaged him at Sellers' corner in New York; hence Fred was all at sea when the young fireman spoke to him as he did.

"Now, see hyer, my young cove," said Fred, in an undertone, "you may be all right. I don't know nothing about it. But if you put yer fingers in this 'ere pie yer'll get 'em smashed—do ye hear?"

"Oh! Tom didn't tell you, eh?"

"He told me nothing."

"Oh, that's all right. My name is Jim Langley here at this hotel.

"When will Tom be here?"

"To-morrow."

"Go ahead then. I'll wait till he comes. I know the man your game is with; he lives here at this house."

"What's his name?" Fred asked.

"James Wright."

Fred made no further remarks, but contented himself with watching for the return of his man from the room up-stairs.

After an hour's watching he saw the man come down, and, going to the register, entered his name as:

"Bemis Palmer, Chicago," and then paid for a room in advance for the night.

Fred Harris inspected the register, and entered his name immediately under Palmer's, calling for a room and paying for it as the other had done.

Dick was overjoyed at thus having the rascals under surveillance, and felt sure of running them down at an early day.

"But how is it?" he said to himself, "that Wright has business or social relations with them? I don't understand it. I am puzzled, and know not what to think of it. I'll keep an eye on him after this."

The next day Hard-fist Tom came up from New York, and put Fred into the hands of the young fireman, to whom he reported that Palmer was in the employ of the Wattles gang in New York.

"I thought as much," said Dick, "and now I want to get 'em where I can land 'em in State Prison. They have been trying to lay me out for two months or more. I don't intend to be laid out if I can help it, and so you must help me do the job. I haven't got much money—only a few hundred dollars in bank--but I'll spend every cent of that to lay out the gang."

"We'll lay 'em out," said Fred; "so just let me know what you want me to do, and I'll do it."

"I want you to find out who this gang is, and locate 'em. When I know my men I know how to work 'em."

"That's good horse sense," remarked Hard-fist Tom. "First know your man and then go for him."

Hard-fist Tom was then advised to put up at another hotel and not appear to know Fred or Langley. He accordingly did so, and then Fred went on with his shadowing of Palmer.

Dick, as Jim Langley, soon made the acquaintance of Wright, the friend of Palmer.

He found him a man ready to indulge in a drink, smoke or game of draw poker at any hour in the twenty-four.

A day or two later he was introduced to Mr. Palmer of Chicago, and Dick invited him to drink with him at the bar.

In the meantime Fred Harris never lost sight of his game.

He made the discovery that Palmer and Wright held frequent consultations in the latter's room, and that the consultations were carried on in low whispers.

"Then Wright is engaged in the conspiracy," said Dick, his brow darkening, "and he has been in our hall and in my bedroom several times. He has even run to fires with us and gained the confidence of the boys. By George, but he is a cunning spy! He is the head of the gang, since they consult him about what they must do. I'll bring him down and break up the whole gang, and send Nick Wattles to State Prison. It's a sharp game he is playing, but I know his hand now, and will trump him just when he thinks he has it all his own way."

Having set the trap, Dick returned to his quarters and laid aside his disguise, saying to his friends that he had been out of town for a few days.

His reappearance at the engine-house was the signal for the villains to begin their work again.

Wright greeted him cordially when they met, and he appeared none the less cordial himself.

The next evening the young fireman dressed himself in his best suit, and made a call on Nora Norcross, the lady member of the hook and ladder company. Though dressed in his best Sunday suit he was armed to the teeth, and prepared for any emergency that might arise.

When but half way to his destination, he became aware that he was followed by someone—probably Palmer. Then he soon saw, by the aid of a friendly gas lamp, that Fred Harris was following Palmer.

"Oh, that's all right," he chuckled. "Maybe we will have some fun on my way back to my quarters. Here's the house. I'll go in and see the divine Nora, and in her presence forget all dangers."

CHAPTER XIV.

BEATEN TO DEATH.

Nora Norcross was an extremely beautiful girl, whose queenly carriage had caused her companions in the factory where she worked to regard her as haughty and reserved. But she was not haughty, though somewhat reserved in her intercourse with others.

She had been highly educated—reared in the lap of wealth. A sudden reverse of fortune threw them into the depth of poverty. Her father died of a broken heart, and the mother and daughter sought seclusion in a distant city. For months Nora sought to earn a support by teaching music, her father having spent thousands of dollars in giving her a musical education.

But it was such an uncertain living, that she at last threw off all reserve and entered the great factory, where she earned enough to support life without any of its comforts. Her heroic conduct on the occasion of the burning of the factory had made her name familiar to everybody in the city. Her pictures, too, adorned the windows of the business houses, and every fireman in Dunkirk became her personal champion.

Dick had paid her several visits since the fire, and she had begun to look for him with a fluttering of her heart, that told her he was very dear to her. On his part he regarded her as the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, as well as the bravest.

It is no wonder, then, that he called on her often, and that she looked anxiously for the hour of his coming. Nellie Smith and Minnie Cranston were fast being forgotten in the presence of the queenly blonde beauty of the factory.

When he left the cottage to return to his quarters, he noticed that the man who had followed him was on the other side of the street waiting for his reappearance. He also noticed that Fred Harris was on hand, not far off.

"Now we'll see some fun," Dick muttered to himself, as he crossed over to where Palmer was standing.

"Have you a match about you, sir?" he asked, drawing a cigar from his pocket.

"Yes, sir; I have," was the reply, as he felt in his pocket for the match.

But instead of a match he drew forth a dirk-knife and made a thrust at the young fireman.

Dick was on the lookout.

He caught him by the wrist with his left hand, and held him as in a vise. Then with his right he gave him a half dozen blows with all his might, on nose and eyes.

He went down like a log, and as bloody as a butchered pig.

Whack!

Whack!

Whack!

He continued to give him blows while he was down, putting in several kicks for good measure.

Fred Harris ran up and asked:

"Want any help?"

"No. You saw him?"

"Yes; by the lamp light."

"Then wait here till he comes to. I want to say something to him in the presence of a witness."

"All right, sir."

By and by Palmer came to.

He was bruised and battered almost beyond recognition.

He started to rise to his feet.

"Hold on!" said Dick; "if you try to get up yet I'll kick your head off. I have tumbled to your game, and had a man follow you as a witness. You are the same man who followed me to New York the other day, are you not?"

"No; never saw you before."

"Oh, if that's your game I'll arrest you. I have a witness here to your attempt to assassinate me with this dirk knife. We can give you about five years in State prison. But if you tell the truth, give the whole business away, I will let you go. Otherwise I will march you into the nearest police station and have you locked up on the charge of an attempt on my life."

The man was quiet, and made no reply for some time.

"Which shall it be?" the young fireman asked.

"What do you want?"

"Information as to——"

"You won't get any information out of me," the man said, interrupting him very promptly.

"Very well. I already have more than you fellows dream of. Come, Mr. Harris, let's take him to the station-house."

"Come along," said Fred, assisting him to his feet.

Palmer was assisted to his feet and marched towards the station-house.

"Here," he said, coming to a halt, "what's the use of this? I am punished enough anyway."

"Oh, you are not punished half enough yet," replied Dick. "I have been hounded for two months, and now I am going to put a stop to it if I have to kill a dozen men."

"You've almost killed me," said the prisoner, and he reeled and began to grow weak in the knees.

"Oh, you are not half dead yet," replied Dick. "Come on! We will soon be there."

"I can't go any further—you have killed me!" And as he spoke Palmer sank down between them, gasping and groaning as if in great pain.

"Oh, come now—that won't do!" said Dick.

In another moment the man was insensible.

"By the dead prophets," gasped Fred Harris, "I believe he's kicked the bottom out of his bucket!"

"No!" exclaimed Dick.

"I say yes."

Dick knelt down and felt of his pulse.

It had ceased to beat.

"Hanged if I don't believe he is dead!" he exclaimed, after a minute of silence.

"That's bad for us," remarked Fred.

"Not a bit of it. He made an attempt on my life, and I acted in self-defense."

"That's the size of it."

"Yes—call a policeman."

Dick raised his voice, and called:

"Police! Police! Police!"

Every door on the block opened and people ran out to see what the trouble was. A dozen men ran up.

"What's the matter?" they asked.

"Here's a dead man," said Dick.

"Good Lord! So there is!" and a scramble to see the dead man's face followed.

Matches were struck, and everyone had a look at the dead man.

Nobody knew who he was.

A policeman came up.

"Who did this?" he asked.

"Hanged if I know," said Fred Harris, nudging Dick's elbow. "Mr. Decker and I found him here."

The policeman knew Dick, and turning to him, asked:

"Do you know him?"

"I think I do. He is, or was, stopping at the Dunkirk House."

The policeman sent for an ambulance and had the body taken to the hotel for identification.

The news soon spread that one of the guests of the house had been found dead on the street.

Every guest came down from their rooms to see who it was.

James Wright came, and on seeing who it was, exclaimed:

"My God! it's my friend Palmer!"

"You knew him, did you?" the officer asked, looking him full in the face.

"Yes," he replied, turning deathly pale, "I knew him in—New York."

"You will notify his people?"

"Yes—I will pay all the expenses of his burial."

The body was then removed to an undertaker's and the coroner notified.

When Dick and Fred left the hotel together, the former remarked:

"I fear we have done wrong in not telling everything we know about this thing."

"No—we have done just right," replied Fred. "There are no witnesses, and we need not get ourselves into trouble about it. His pals will not say a word to give it away."

"But it will have to come out some day, and then I will suffer in public opinion for not having told the truth about it. We won't have any trouble, because it was in self-defense. I will stand by you to the last. You had nothing to do with it anyhow."

"All right! But wait till the coroner sits to-morrow."

"Yes, I will."

The next day the whole town was electrified with the story of the mysterious murder, for the papers had given it as heard the night before.

When the coroner's jury met, James Wright and the young fireman met face to face over the remains of the dead.

CHAPTER XV.

ANOTHER TRAGEDY.

THE two men eyed each other suspiciously, and then pretended not to notice the other's presence.

But Frank had instructed Hard-fist Tom to be on hand, and shadow Wright when he left the undertaker's shop where the inquest was to be held. Tom was promptly on hand, ready to do anything for the gallant young fireman.

When the coroner's jury was organized, the remains were exposed to view. Dick noticed that Wright turned deathly pale as he gazed at the dead man's face.

But when the young fireman was requested to tell the jury what he knew about the dead man, he commenced and told the whole story of the man's following him to New York, and of his employing Fred Harris to shadow him; how the man had followed him the evening before; how, when he stepped up to him and asked for a match to light his cigar with, the man drew a dirk-knife and attempted to stab him.

"I then caught him by the wrist," he continued, "and gave him what I thought he deserved in the way of a thrashing, using only my hands and feet. Mr. Harris was an eye-witness of the whole transaction. I did not intend to kill him, or even do him any serious injury, and now deeply regret that I did."

The coroner and spectators were utterly amazed at his testimony.

Probably James Wright was the only man who had entertained any suspicions as to how Palmer came to his death. But no one else in Dunkirk did, hence the sensation that followed his confession.

The news spread like a prairie fire, and all the firemen in the city who knew of the varions attacks that had been made on the young hook and ladder leader were ready to swear that Dick had served the villain just right.

Harris corroborated Dick's testimony, and then the jury decided that the deceased was killed by Dick Decker under circumstances that rendered it justifiable.

After such a verdict as that there was no arrest made, and people crowded around Dick to congratulate him on his success in disposing of the villain in the manner he did.

James Wright was about to leave when the verdict was rendered, but Dick stepped up to him and, in the presence of a score of friends, said to him:

"Mr. Wright, you have been received by our people here as a gentleman. This man was your friend. He came here and had several secret consultations with you in your room at the hotel, after which he came out and began dogging me wherever I went. If such——"

"You are a liar!" hissed Wright, livid with rage.

The words had hardly died on his lips ere Dick sprang upon him like a tiger, and dealt him a blow that laid him out at full length on the floor.

The members of the jury rushed in and parted them.

Wright rose to his feet, dazed by the blow.

But he was as cool as a cucumber, for he merely said:

"I might get satisfaction by shooting you on the spot, but I won't. The law will give me the satisfaction I want."

"That's a sensible view, sir," said the coroner, "but the law won't do very much with a man for knocking one down for calling him a liar."

"That's so!" exclaimed a fireman, who was in the party. "Hurrah for Liberty Hook and Ladder!"

The crowd cheered the young fireman and hissed Wright, who quickly made his escape and retired to his hotel.

The dead man was buried by the undertaker at Wright's expense, and then Wright himself disappeared from Dunkirk. At least he paid his hotel bill and left the house.

But he changed his disguise and came back the next day.

"I don't know that I have broken up the plot to put me out of the way," said Dick to Ben Wilson, a day or two after, "but I've made 'em sick a little, I think."

"Yes, they must be very sick," assented Ben. "Wright has mizzled, and Wattles is in jail. The insurance money is still at stake, though, and they may come at you again. Better be on the lookout."

"I will, and the next man who tries the game on me shall go right after Palmer."

"That's right. Make 'em sick."

"I will."

Two days later Dick received a note from Nora Norcross, asking him to call and see her that evening, as she had something important to communicate to him.

"Yes," said Dick, as he folded the note and put it in his pocket,

"of course I'll go. I would like to call on her every day in the year."

That evening he dressed himself and wended his way toward the humble cottage of the Widow Norcross.

When but two blocks from the cottage, two men stepped out from behind an old building. It was quite dark at that point, the street lamp having been extinguished on the opposite corner.

The moment Dick saw them he suspected treachery. He drew his revolver and threw himself on his knees.

Two pistol shots rang out on the night air, and two bullets whistled just above his head.

Crack!

Crack!

Dick fired back quickly.

"Oh, God!" exclaimed one of the men. "I am shot!"

The other man took to his heels and ran up the street at the top of his speed. The wounded man walked a little distance, and then reeled like a drunken man. Then he staggered forward and fell on his face.

"My God!" exclaimed Dick, "I have killed another man! What a fate is mine!"

Two men came running up.

"What's the matter?" they asked.

"Two men attacked me, and I fear one of them is dead," he replied.

"Where are they?"

"There lies one. The other ran away;" and the party went to the man who was lying on the ground.

He was still breathing, but his life was fast ebbing away from a mortal wound in the breast.

"Who are you?" one of the men asked of the dying man.

"I am dying," was the reply.

"But who are you, and who shot you?" was asked again.

"Dick Decker shot me. But he is not to blame, for I was there to shoot him;" and then he groaned in an agony of pain.

"Why did you want to shoot me?" Dick asked. "I never did you any harm."

"No. I was hired—to—do it;" and he again groaned and seemed on the point of going into a spasm from excessive pain.

But he rallied again.

"Who was the man with you?" Dick asked.

"I—won't—squeal," he said; and then he rolled over on his side and gave a gasp; then he stretched himself at full length, groaned again, and then all was still.

The man was dead.

CHAPTER XVI.

NORA NORCROSS—THE VILLAINS.

As the man breathed his last, the young fireman stood over him like one in a dream.

"This is the second one," he said. "I did not seek a quarrel with him. He was an entire stranger to me. I have the right to live, and am going to defend my life to the death any time I am attacked."

"You have done just what every other brave man would have done, Dick," said one of the men who had heard the dying man's confession. "No one can blame you, except for not bringing the other man down, too."

"Yes, that's so!" chorused the others. "You did just right."

"My conscience does not trouble me about it," he said, "but I have saved so many lives, that I don't feel right when I have to kill one."

"Of course not; but then it's a good deal better than being killed yourself."

"Yes. I don't intend to be wiped out by any other man if I can help it. I have a right to live."

By this time two policemen came up, and were amazed when they found a dead man there.

"How did this happen?" one of them asked.

It was soon explained.

"We will have to arrest you," one said to Dick.

"Don't do it. I will go to the station-house. You take care of the dead man."

The officer knew his man, and said to him:

"Go ahead. I'll risk my position on you any day."

"Thank you, Mack. I won't go back on you."

"Oh, I am sure of that," said the officer; "go ahead, and good luck to you."

Dick turned away and started for the station-house.

But on the way it occurred to him that perhaps Nora Norcross might be waiting for him.

"I'll run by and let her know what has happened," he said, and then he turned into another street and called at the little cottage of the Widow Norcross.

Nora was at home.

"Why, Mr. Decker!" she exclaimed, on seeing him. "I am so glad to see you. I didn't expect you to-night, and——"

"You did not expect me?"

"Why, no. I thought——"

"You did not write this note?" and he handed her the note that had drawn him to the spot that was to witness his death.

"No," she said, as she took the note; "I never sent you any note to-day."

"Then it was a diabolical plot."

"What was? Please explain! Tell me what has happened?"

"I received this note this afternoon," he said, "and came in response to the invitation it contained. When on the corner, two blocks above here, I noticed the street lamp had been extinguished. The corner was quite dark. Two men rushed out at me. The moment I saw them I suspected some kind of treachery, and so dodged and drew my revolver. We all three fired at the same time. One of the men ran away as fast as he could. The other staggered across the street, where he fell and died."

"Oh, mercy!" she exclaimed! "Another man killed! Heavens! what are we coming to?"

"Before he died, the man, in the presence of witnesses, exonerated me from all blame, saying that I had fired in self-defense."

"Oh, I am so glad of that!"

"But I am going to the station-house to give myself up."

"But they won't do anything to you?"

"Oh, no! The coroner's jury will exonerate me to-morrow."

"It is awful!"

"Yes. I feel very bad about it, but it can't be helped."

"No, I suppose not. I am sorry the man was killed, and yet so glad you were not hurt."

"Thanks! I do not intend to let 'em get in ahead of me if I can help it. I don't know what new dodge they will try next."

He spent a few minutes with the charming girl, and then took leave of her, promising to call again soon.

On leaving the Norcross cottage he went direct to the station-house and surrendered himself. The news of the tragedy had preceded him, and the captain of the station was expecting him.

"So you have been at it again, Dick?" said the officer to him, as he entered the station.

"Yes. If I had not been very quick I would not have been able to tell you about it. Sorry I didn't get in on the other fellow, too."

"Yes—pity you didn't," remarked the captain.

"You want to lock me up, do you not?" Dick asked.

"No. Why should I?"

"Because the law requires it."

"Well, the law is to supply justice to all, and that being the case, you can come around to-morrow and see what justice demands of you. Do you understand?"

"Yes. I will be sure to be on hand if alive and well," and then he went out among his friends.

Ben Wilson and a number of the firemen were on hand. They received him with a cheer, and then mounted him on their shoulders to carry him to the engine house.

Half the night was spent in congratulations and merry-making, and the young fireman was touched by the hearty devotion of his friends.

"Boys," he said to them, just before he started to return to his room, "I will never forget your kindness to me. I may be wiped out at any moment, but my last remembrance will be of the friendship of my brave comrades, who have so often risked their lives with me in battling the flames."

The boys cheered him lustily and then escorted him round to his room, which was only about three short blocks from the engine house. There they left him at a late hour and returned to their

respective homes, to wonder over the uniform good luck in keeping alive under such circumstances.

The next day the papers gave voice to the indignation of the citizens of Dunkirk over the repeated attempts to assassinate the gallant young fireman. They all rejoiced that he had killed one of his assailants, and hoped the friends of Dick would lynch the other if they caught him.

Let us now return to the scene of the tragedy, and follow the man who ran away when his comrade was shot.

The reader will remember that the man who was killed cried out that he was shot a moment or two after the young fireman's bullet struck him, and that his companion turned and fled down the street, going around a corner in time to avoid a parting shot that was sent after him.

That man, soon after turning the corner of the street below, changed his pace to an ordinary walk in order to avoid exciting any suspicions in the minds of those he might meet on the way.

Three blocks away he turned into one of the main business streets of Dunkirk. Up that street he went, till he came to a certain saloon, which enjoyed an unsavory reputation in that end of the town. From the interior of the saloon came forth sounds that told of the presence of many half-intoxicated persons.

But the sounds that came therefrom did not deter the man from entering there. He merely stopped on the sidewalk long enough to look to see whether or not he had been followed. Being satisfied on that point, he turned and entered the saloon.

Around the front room were a dozen tables, at which about a score of men were sitting, smoking and drinking. Some of the men were hard-featured, as if long familiar with crime and dissipation. Others were there whose appearance did not indicate a very long acquaintance with such scenes. But they did not seem to be much out of place there, as they conducted themselves as if they enjoyed their surroundings.

The man looked around the room as if to note who were there rather than to find any particular individual. Then he passed through to a back room, the door to which was closed, but he pushed it open and walked in.

"Hello!" exclaimed a man, who sat at a table with two others, "back so soon?"

"Yes," growled the new-comer, "and blessed glad to get back."

"What's the matter? Haven't made another miss, have you?"

The new-comer dropped into a chair and glared at the speaker.

"Miss is no name for it," he said. "The fellow tumbled to us."

"Eh! What?"

"He dropped to the game, and came to the spot with a cocked revolver in his hand. He laid Brisler out at the first shot, and then paid his attention to me. Seeing that he had dropped to us, I took to my heels to keep his gang from pouncing down on me."

"But where did you leave Brisler?"

"He staggered across the street and dropped. Guess he is wiped out."

"Good Heavens!" gasped the leader of the party. "If he was not killed instantly he may have given the whole thing away!"

"Not a bit of it," said another one of the party. "John Brisler is not the man to squeal."

"But on his death-bed the best and bravest men unbosom themselves, and——"

"Yes—yes—that's so!" exclaimed one of the party, rising to his feet, with a scared look on his face; "I never thought of that. We had better be getting out of here."

"No—we will not be sought for here. One of us must go out and see what he has said, and then come back and let the others know. Who will volunteer to go?"

"I will," answered the new-comer, rising to his feet. "I know just where to go to hear everything that is going on, and my identity is not yet suspected. Will you all remain here till I come back?"

"Yes—right here in this room."

"Then I am off."

"Don't be gone long."

"No—be back soon."

The man examined his revolver very carefully, and then, thrusting it in his pocket, stalked out of the room.

The other three then took copious drinks from a black bottle, and resumed the game of cards the new-comer had interrupted.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE VILLAINS PLOTTING A FIRE.

THE game had progressed about an hour, when the man returned to the saloon and entered the rear room again. The cards were dropped, and the three men stared at him as if seeking to read the news in the expression of his face ere he could find time to speak.

"What is it?" the leader asked, his impatience getting the better of him. "Tell us the news."

"We are all safe," was the reply. "Brisler is dead. He didn't squeal, but did exonerate him from any blame in the matter."

"Good for John! He was game to the last. Didn't tell who was with him, eh?"

"No. They asked him, but he said he never squealed."

"He is dead, then?"

"Yes; and they have carried the body to the jail yard."

"They have?"

"Yes."

"Well, they can't do him any more hurt. He was a game un."

"What's to be done next?"

"What can we do but finish the job? He must be fixed, and if four of us can't do it, we ought to be wiped out ourselves."

"Two have already been wiped out," suggested the man with red hair.

"Yes," said the leader, "and when we wipe *him* out that will make three."

"So it will, but not three of a kind," was the red head's reply.

"He is a hard one to manage, but we'll fetch him next time."

"How?"

"That's to be decided—let's have another drink."

From a large black bottle on the table they each poured out a drink of whisky and tossed it off without so much as hinting at water as an accompaniment. Then they drew their sleeves across their mouths after the manner of the ancients, and looked around at their leader as if waiting for suggestions from him.

"You know how much is at stake, pards," said the leader, in a low tone of voice. "Our pay is at stake, too; and then we want revenge for Palmer and Brisler."

"Yes, that's so," chorused the others. "We'll fix him anyhow, drat 'im!"

"Just so. Now we must not make any miss this time."

"No," said the new-comer; "the whole community will be up in arms to-morrow."

"And they will be worse when we fix him."

"Of course."

"We'll have to get out."

"Yes. We don't live here anyway," growled red head.

"No. It won't break our hearts to go."

"What is the next move?"

"We must have a fire," said the leader of the gang.

"How?"

"Set a house on fire and pretend to be helping save the goods, and when he runs in, as he always does, draw our knives and cut him up, throw him into the fire, and let the flames have the benefit of the job."

"Land o' Goshen!" exclaimed red head, "that's the genius of a statesman! We won't have the public mind stirred up, nor all the detectives in the country on our tracks."

"That's so," chorused the others.

"Yes. We would have no more trouble then," said the leader.

"But where is the fire to be?"

"We must find a place."

"I know a good place," remarked one of the party.

"Where?"

"In a big pork house up-town. The grease will make things burn so that all the engines in the world couldn't put it out."

"I know the place. You are right," said the leader. "I will look at it to-morrow and see what can be done. We will meet here to-morrow night."

The four men then left the place, one by one, to avoid suspicion. Those in the main saloon did not suspect who they were or their business.

Out on the street they met again, and went up the street, going into another saloon, one by one, and pretending to be utter strangers to

one another. There they drank whisky straight, beer and ale being too weak for them.

Two hours passed, and then they filed out again, each man going to his quarters.

The next day a man was seen prowling around the pork store of Hugh Gaines, in the upper part of the city. He inspected the front and rear of the place, and found that three floors over the store were occupied by families of working people. There were stairways front and rear, by which the inmates could escape in the case of fire.

"No lives being in danger, this is just the thing we want," said the man. "The grease that saturates all the lower part of the building will make a good fire and plenty of black smoke."

The diabolical wretch coolly plotted the destruction of these happy homes, as well as the store, where women and little children lived in fancied security, in order to carry out his plot against the life of the gallant young fireman of Dunkirk.

That night he met his pals in the rear of the saloon where they had met before, and heard what they had to say about the state of public opinion as to the last attempt on Dick Decker's life.

"The whole town stands by him to a man," said red head.

"Well, that was expected," remarked the leader.

"Yes," said another. "What care we for the public's opinion?"

"Well," said the leader, "we will give the public a chance to erect a monument to his memory, under the impression that he died in the discharge of his duty. I went up to the pork-store to-day, and found it to be just the place we want. We can take a gallon of oil and make a blaze that will be his last fire."

"How about the families over the store?" one of them asked.

"Why, we will be the first ones to wake them up and help 'em get out. They will lose nothing but their furniture."

"That won't amount to much, I guess."

"No, they are poor people, and if we can succeed in fixing him, we can afford to give 'em enough to set 'em up again."

"Yes, that's so. Now how shall we work it?"

"Why, I've got it down fine," was the reply. "We must get in at the back way. Nobody sleeps in the store. We can pick the lock, go in and throw the oil over everything, drop a match, run out, close the door, and then wait for it to get a good start before we give the alarm. By the time the engines get there the fire will be too strong for them. We can then assist in getting the familes out. He will come thundering up-stairs and be entirely off his guard. We must rush on him—all four of us—cut him down, and then throw him into the flames. He will be nothing but a charred mess when they find him, and everybody will call him a hero and say he lost his life in trying to save others. It would not even be hinted on Nick's trial that foul play had removed their best and only witness."

"But how will we get out?" one of the villains asked.

"Walk out, run out, jump out, fall out, anyway so we get out," was the reply. "We would be fools to stay there and be roasted."

"But we may be roasted for all that," suggested one.

"Yes, but the one who does get roasted will get just what he deserved for being a fool."

They all laughed, and then the preliminaries were entered into as coolly as if they were going to an ice-cream festival.

It was agreed that each was to purchase a quart of oil on the day following and pour it into a gallon jug, which was to be carried to the place of rendezvous the next night.

Every little point was mutually understood between them, so that no mistakes were likely to occur to thwart their plans.

When everything was agreed on, the party of villains separated and retired again to their quarters.

On the morrow they each went to certain grocers to purchase a quart of oil for illuminating purposes.

One of them, the man with the red hair, went down-town a considerable distance to make his purchase. He went into a corner grocery, where several customers were waiting to be served, among whom was a tall, handsome blonde.

He was forced to wait his turn, and while doing so heard a man say something about the young fireman's last exploit.

Red head remarked:

"That's all very well, but he is altogether too free with his revolver."

The blonde turned suddenly, gave him a searching glance, and then left the store.

CHAPTER XVIII.

NORA TURNS SHADOW.

THE reader will doubtless recognize the handsome blonde as Nora Norcross, whose heroic conduct at the burning of the factory had made her name familiar to everybody in Dunkirk.

She was now a member of Liberty Hook and Ladder, and the pride and pet of the company.

When she emerged out on the street again, she muttered to herself:

"That man hates Dick for some cause or other. He has a bad face—looks like a bad man. Dick never did him any harm in his life. He may be one of the men who have been trying to injure him. I'll run home, change my dress, put on a heavy veil, and then follow him. I can then tell Dick what he said, and he can then watch him."

With Nora, to resolve was to act.

She hastened home, which was but one short block away, changed her dress, and put on a thick veil. Thus attired, she came back to the grocery and passed near enough to look in.

The red-headed man was still there, waiting to be served.

She waited till he came out, and then followed him at a distance, keeping him in sight till he entered his quarters. Then she waited a half hour to see if he would come out again.

Just as she was about to leave she saw him come out and stroll down the street.

Following him at a distance, she saw him meet another man, who carried an oil-can in his hands. They stopped to talk, and she concluded to walk past them.

They did not notice her as she went past. But she took an impression of their faces on her memory.

"Has Jim got his oil?" she heard one ask the other.

"Guess he has. Come down to Merry's saloon and have a drink."

"When I carry my can home."

And then she heard no more, as she had passed too far beyond to catch anything else they said.

"Something tells me that the man with red hair is in some way connected with Dick's enemies," said Nora to herself, "and I am going to follow him up, even if it leads me into that awful saloon. I can't go in there as a woman, for that would ruin me forever. But I'll run home and put on a suit of my father's clothes. I am as tall as he was, and nearly as large. I—I—hope I am not doing wrong. I know mother would not consent, but I am going to do so, nevertheless. He risked his life for me, and I am willing to risk all for him. If he is one of those bad men who are trying to do him harm, Dick ought to know it."

She hastened back home and at once proceeded to dress herself in a suit of her father's clothes.

The suit fitted her shape admirably, and with a slouch hat on she looked like a youth of but eighteen summers. Her very great beauty, however, was her weakest point. There was danger of its betraying her sex.

But she did not stop to think of any possible danger to herself. Her only thought was for the man who never thought of himself when others were in danger.

Slipping out of the house without letting her mother know anything of her intentions, she hurried away to Merry's saloon, a place of the most unsavory reputation in the city.

When she reached the place she halted at the entrance a moment, but only for a moment. Her courage did not fail her. She only wanted to gather her wits about her, as she was going into a dangerous place.

She entered and looked around the room. There were many men and a few women sitting at the tables, drinking beer and stronger liquors. But she did not see the red-haired man she was looking for, and was on the point of turning to leave, when the thonght occurred to her that she ought to sit down and wait and watch.

She did so, and a waiter came up and asked her what she would have to drink.

"Bring me a glass of lemonade, very sweet," she said.

It was such an unusual order in that vile place that the waiter stared as if surprised.

"Want a stick in it?" he asked.

She did not know what he meant, and so to be on the safe side answered:

"No, mild and sweet."

The lemonade was soon made and put on the table in front of her, and pay collected. Then she sipped it at leisure and watched the door.

In about half an hour she saw the red-headed man come in with another, whose villainous countenance would hang him in some countries. They sat down at a table in the opposite corner of the room, and gave the waiter an order which she could not hear.

There was a table adjoining theirs at which there was no one. She arose and sauntered over there, seating herself at the table and ordering another glass of lemonade.

Whilst waiting for the lemonade she overheard one of them say:

"I guess we have got the thing down fine now."

"Yes. It will be his last fire."

"Have you seen Ab to-day?"

"Yes; saw him with his little can going to his room."

"Will he come in this afternoon or evening?"

"Don't know about this afternoon, but he will be here this evening. He never gives up, you know."

"That's so. He's a game un, though he did run the other night."

"Oh, he run then because he saw the game had tumbled. By the way, that's the strangest thing I ever heard of. How did he suspect the game? The girl knew nothing about the note, and she had never written him a line in her life."

"It's one of the mysteries that may never be unraveled. I don't understand, and don't try to. I am a poor hand at puzzles and puns."

"So am I. Ah! here comes Ab!"

Nora looked around toward the door, and beheld a tall, athletic-looking man enter the saloon and walk around among the tables till he saw the two men over in the corner. She did not remember seeing him before, and so listened to see if he was connected with them in any way.

"Have you got your can ready?" the red-headed man asked, as the new-comer took his seat and called for a glass of whisky.

"Yes, two hours ago."

"Have you seen Jim."

"Yes; he is all right."

"Here's to success this time."

"Yes—we can't fail this time."

The three men emptied their glasses and then called for more of the vile stuff.

"What time do we go to-night?"

"About midnight, I guess," said the man they called Ab. "Everybody will be in bed then—except us—and we can——" here his voice sunk to such a low tone that Nora could not catch another word.

She listened for some time, and saw that their whispering was too soft and low to do her any good. So she arose and went out into the open air.

"Oh!" she said, as she stopped and looked around in an uncertain frame of mind, "I know they are meditating some harm to Dick, and he never did any harm to them. They are going to do something to-night, and I don't know what it is. I heard one say it would be his last fire, so I suppose there is to be a fire. Oh! they had oil cans! They are going to set some place afire and then rob somebody, or else try to kill someone. Oh! I don't know what to do!"

Then, as if a sudden notion had come to her, she started off, and made straight for the engine house, where she hoped to find Dick. But he was not there, nor did any one there know where he was.

"Who shall I say called?" Ben Wilson asked.

"Tell him a friend called. I will call again," and with that she turned away, lest he should insist on having her name.

"Oh! where can he be?" she asked herself a dozen times, as she walked back down the street. "He ought to know about those men before night, or it may be too late."

But she did not succeed in finding Dick, and as the sun went down and night came on, she made up her mind to follow the men wherever they went.

"If they raise a fire," she reasoned, "Dick will be sure to come to it, and I can rush to his side and warn him of his danger. He will then be surrounded by his comrades, and will be in little or no danger."

Going back to Merry's saloon, she waited till she caught sight of one of the villains again, which she soon did, and proceeded to follow him.

He went to another saloon, and was joined there by the others. They drank and smoked till near midnight, and then left the place one by one.

Nora followed them near enough to keep them in sight, till they reached the pork store which had been selected to be the scene of their villainy.

Two of them remained on the watch outside, whilst two others went in by means of skeleton keys.

In a few minutes she saw a glare of light in the store, and heard the ominous cry of:

"Fire! Fire!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE BATTLE IN THE FLAMES.

THE reader will naturally ask why Nora did not raise the alarm in time to prevent the fire. Had she been less thoughtful she would have done so, and thereby lost her life; for the villains would have turned on and killed her on the spot, to save themselves. All this she reasoned, and from that reasoning she concluded to remain silent, and wait for the coming of the firemen.

She did not have to wait long.

The villains themselves gave the alarm, and then proceeded to wake up and rescue the families sleeping in the upper portion of the building.

The great fire bell pealed forth the alarm that aroused the entire city from its slumbers. A few minutes later the engines came thundering along, and the hook and ladder company dashed up and proceeded to run up their ladders to the windows.

Dick Decker was at the head of his men, directing their movements, when a young man, as he thought, ran up and clutched his arm.

"Beware how you go into that building! Your enemies set fire to it to draw you in there."

Then the young man darted back into the crowd and was lost to his view.

Dick was amazed at what he heard, but he was not the man to stand back under such circumstances.

"Save me—save me!" screamed a woman at one of the windows on the top floor.

That was enough.

He sprang up the ladder with the agility of a squirrel, and in another moment was at the window.

The woman crawled out to him, and he brought her safely down to the ground, where he found her to be in a swoon.

Fearing there were others in the room, he hastened up to the window again, and entered the burning building.

The room was full of smoke, and he sung out:

"Here's help! Where are you?"

Getting no answer, he ran across the hall and pushed open another door. That room was also filled with smoke, and a roaring volume of flame was coming up the stairs.

He turned to go back, when he heard a voice exclaim:

"Here he is!"

Four men, with drawn knives, rushed toward him.

Decker remembered the warning he had received from the young man just before he ascended the ladder, and instantly drew his revolver.

Blinded by the smoke, the four men dashed forward to where they had seen him but a moment before.

But they had not seen him spring aside, and the result was they commenced stabbing each other with savage fury, whilst their intended victim stood by looking on. Being used to fire and smoke, Dick could stand it like a salamander, and had no difficulty in watching the four villains cut each other to pieces.

"Cut him up!" cried one.

"Cut his heart out!" cried another with a savage oath.

"I'm stabbed!" groaned a third.

Dick looked on in amazement.

Such a savage fury he never dreamed could exist in a human being as he saw exhibited by the four villains. So dense was the smoke that he could not distinguish the features of one of them.

The place finally became so hot that the young fireman called out to them:

"If you fools don't want to be roasted you had better come out of

this. I am Dick Decker, and have been watching you fellows carve each other up for two minutes or more."

"Ten thousand devils!" roared one of the villains; "are you alive yet?"

"Oh, yes. I'm all right," and the gallant young fireman laughed outright.

"Take that and die, then!" and the desperate wretch drew his revolver and fired at Dick. But he was so blinded by the smoke that his bullet went wide of the mark.

"You take one from me," said the fireman, "and see how it will agree with you," and the next moment Dick gave him a bullet in the chest from his trusty six shooter.

"I am shot!" cried the man, as he dropped his revolver and clutched his breast.

"Of course you are!" and Dick gave him another bullet which laid him out on the floor.

The man with the red hair was down on the floor with a knife stuck to the hilt in his bosom, and a third one was gasping in suffocating agony from smoke.

Suddenly there was a wild cry from the firemen and multitude outside. Dick could hear them shouting to someone:

"Come back! Come back!"

A moment or two later he turned to make his escape from the room, when he heard a woman's voice cry out:

"Dick—Dick, my hero! Have they hurt you?"

He sprang forward and caught a young man, as he thought, in his arms, when he discovered that it was a woman.

"My God!" he exclaimed. "Who are you? Speak!"

"Thank God he is safe!"

"Yes, I am safe enough. Oh, Nora, is it you? You have saved my life!" and he pressed her to his heart and covered her pale face with kisses.

"I—I—couldn't help it," she said, "as I heard the pistol shots, for I thought they were trying to kill you."

"Come away, quick!" he cried, as he felt the heat actually baking his flesh. "They are all done for. My vengeance is complete."

She hastened down the ladder in advance of him, amid the shouts of the firemen and the thousands of spectators.

When they reached the ground they found the people wild over the pistol shots they had heard in the burning building.

"What's the matter?" they asked, crowding around Dick. "Are you hurt?"

"No. I am all right, but there are four men up there who will be roasted."

"Four men up there?"

"Yes," and the news went through the crowd that four men were caught in the flames and lost. A shudder of horror passed over many as they looked on the burning building and thought of four human beings roasting therein.

But when Nora Norcross was recognized as the daring youth who had run up the ladder on hearing the pistol shots, the gallant firemen made the welkin ring with their shouts. They crowded around her and tendered their homage, which she blushingly acknowledged.

The immense amount of lard stored in the pork store made it utterly impossible to extinguish the fire. The flames roared fiercely, and ate up every particle of woodwork about the building. The heat became so great that the firemen were compelled to draw off and confine their energies to prevent any further spread of the flames.

It was then that Dick sought an explanation of her conduct from Nora Norcross. Seated on the ladder truck she gave him all the points of her discovery, which the reader already knows.

The young fireman was utterly dumfounded.

"You are a real heroine, Nora," he said, "and I owe you my life. Had you not warned me as you did, I would have fallen under their knives."

"Oh, I am so glad I came, then," she exclaimed, her eyes filling with tears. "I could not rest till I had seen you, and when I heard those shots I thought they were murdering you. I don't know how I got up the ladder, but I went up to help you."

"So you did, bless your brave heart!" and the young fireman grasped her hand and held it in his till her pretty face was all over crimson with happy blushes.

The firemen formed a procession to escort her back to her home. Seated on the top of the truck, she was the cynosure of all eyes, and the boys pulled her through the streets till they reached the cottage home of her mother.

Mrs. Norcross was still up, in great distress of mind, not knowing where her daughter was. The moment she caught sight of Nora in male attire, she exclaimed:

"Oh, daughter, have you been running to the fire like a great tomboy?"

"She came to give me a warning that saved my life, ma'am," said Dick, as he led Nora into the house. "If you give her a scolding we'll tear your house down and do something awful!"

"Then I won't scold her," said the mother, laughing. "I am sure she would never do anything wrong."

Nora ran into her own room to don her proper dress, and in a few minutes was back again in the little parlor, where Dick took her in his arms and told her of his heart's love for her. Then she was more than repaid for all her trouble and peril.

CHAPTER XX.

THE TWO WATTLES BROTHERS.

When Nora had told her story, the firemen were amazed.

It was then known that the fire was the work of incendiaries.

It was also known that all four of the incendiaries were burned to death in the flames of their own kindling, and there was great rejoicing thereat.

The heroic conduct of Nora Norcross was the theme of conversation everywhere. Everybody had a word of praise for the brave girl, as well as for her fireman lover.

A popular subscription to buy a cottage home for her and her widowed mother was suggested by one of the Dunkirk papers. The suggestion was at once acted upon, and money poured into the office of the paper all day long.

A search among the ruins of the fire revealed the charred bones of four men and four knives, also as many revolvers.

"A more diabolical plot was never concocted," remarked the mayor of the city, "nor were villains ever more promptly punished."

"Had I not been warned," said Dick, "I would have fallen under their knives."

"There has been a terrible effort to get you out of the way," the mayor said to him, as he took his hand. "I congratulate you on your narrow escape."

"Thanks. I am alive yet, and will be kicking when a good many others have turned up their toes."

The mayor laughed.

"I believe you," he said. "You have more lives than a black cat."

Of course Dick was more than ever a hero after that terrible battle in the burning building.

People stared at him as the man who had downed six men in a few months, and who had persistently refused police protection when it had been offered to him.

Thousands visited the ruins to look at the ashes that contained all that was left of the four wretches who had lost their lives in an effort to destroy another's.

The next day after the fire a man, a stranger in Dunkirk, called at the jail and asked permission to see Nick Wattles, the man whom Dick had charged as being guilty of setting fire to his store in order to get the insurance.

"Who are you?" the jailer asked.

"I am one of his friends," was the reply.

"What is your name?"

"Jed Wattles," he said; "one of his brothers."

"I thought so," the jailer remarked. "Come this way."

The man followed him through the corridor of the jail, till they arrived at a heavy iron door, which the jailer opened with an enormous key.

"A man to see you, Nick!" the jailer called out, as Jed Wattles entered the cell.

Nick Wattles sprang up from the cot on which he had been lying and grasped his brother's hand.

"Why, Jed!" he exclaimed, as he wrung his hand; "I am glad to see you, even if you do find me in jail."

"I am mighty sorry to find you here, Nick," said Jed. "I landed in New York from California yesterday, and heard then, for the first time, that you were in trouble."

"I will leave you here for a half hour," said the jailer.

"All right, pard," returned the Californian. "I'll be here when you come back."

The jailer locked the cell door, and walked away with a grim smile on his bronzed countenance.

Alone together, the two brothers, who had not met for many years, sat down on the cot and talked.

"Give it to me straight, Nick," said Jed, "and I'll stand by you till my last ounce of dust is gone. I'm a rich man, and don't want one of the Wattles to lie in prison to rot like——"

"I'll give it to you straight as truth can make it, Jed," said the prisoner, "as I know I am in the meshes of a vindictive insurance company, that is trying to avoid paying thirty thousand dollars insurance on my store. A fireman by the name of Dick Decker has been induced to swear that I set fire to the store myself. On his evidence I have been arrested and indicted, and in another month I am to be tried. In the present state of the public mind, owing to certain things that have happened since the fire, I am sure to be convicted and sentenced to ten or fifteen years in penal servitude. I have no witness except to swear to my previous good character, and nobody swears against me but this man Decker. Everybody believes him because he has saved severel women and children at fires, and is popular."

"You didn't burn your store?"

"No, I did not."

"You swear that, Nick?"

"Yes, I swear it."

"Then I believe you. I will go and see this fireman, and——"

"You will have to be careful, Jed," said Nick. "Two of my friends have been killed by him."

"What for?"

"Well, the truth is they were trying to kill him—to get him out of the way."

"So he got the drop on them, did he?" the Californian asked.

"Yes, he got it on them too quick."

"Well, he won't get the drop on me. Jed Wattles ain't that kind of a galoot."

"Be careful, Jed."

"Oh, yes, I'll be careful. I always am. I am a careful man."

"So is Decker. He is quick as lightning on the shoot."

"I ain't going on the shoot," was the reply. "I am going to put gold up, and let him buck against it till his courage gives way."

"Buy him off?"

"You've hit it, Nick."

"You don't know him, Jed," said Nick, with a shake of the head.

"Every man has his price."

"His price is a big one."

"My pile is a big one."

"He has a pride that will make him stiff."

"Gold is heavy. He will bend under a load of it."

"One ounce of lead in the right place, will do more than a thousand ounces of gold."

"We'll see. I will come again to-morrow after I see him."

The jailer came at the end of the half hour, and found them in a whispered conversation.

"Time's up," he said, as he opened the cell door.

"So am I, pard. I run on time and never miss my station," and as he spoke he slipped a ten-dollar gold piece into the jailer's hand.

"What's this for?" the jailer asked.

"For doing what you were not required to do," was the reply. "You're not required by law to let me in to see my brother, and then wait half an hour for me. Your pay is not equal to a banker's, so you should have something for your pains—eh, pard?"

"You reason like a lawyer," said the smiling official, as he pocketed the coin and showed the visitor out of the jail.

"I will return to-morrow," said the Californian.

"You shall be admitted, sir."

Jed Wattles went to a hotel and took a room there, but registering as simply "Jed, California."

That afternoon he went in search of Dick Decker. He failed to find him till near sunset. Then he was pointed out to him in a party of young men in front of the hotel.

The Californian went up to him and asked:

"Is your name Decker?"

"Yes, sir, that's my name," was the prompt reply.

"My name is Wattles—Jed Wattles of California."

Dick looked at him in some surprise, and saw a marked resemblance to the man in jail.

"I have come to Dunkirk to see you, Mr. Decker, and——"

"You are a brother to Nick Wattles, are you not, sir?" Dick asked, interrupting him.

"You've hit it, pard, I am."

"Then you do not feel very friendly toward me, I presume?"

"Yes, I do. The war is ended. I am a peace man, and come to see if we can't compromise on a peace footing."

"I don't understand you," said Dick, in no little surprise. "What do you mean!"

The Californian looked hard at the young man, as if trying to read his thoughts, and said:

"My brother is in your hands, and you can——"

"You are mistaken, sir. He is in the hands of the law, and I am only a witness against him."

"You've hit it, pard!" and the Californian grasped his hand. "The witnesses decide a case every time. My brother didn't do the square thing with you because he is a fool. I am not a fool; no more be you. I have plenty of the dust, and if Nick is acquitted in court you will be a rich man—eh, pard?"

Dick was amazed.

He saw what the man meant, but pretended not to. He also saw that he was a Californian all over, and therefore a very dangerous man in a difficulty.

"Do you twig, pard?" Jed Wattles asked, after a pause.

"I think I do," was the reply.

"What say you?"

"I say nothing just now farther than that I will see you again to-morrow," and with that he walked away and left the Californian standing in front of his hotel.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE CALIFORNIAN.

JED WATTLES glared after the young fireman as though utterly uncertain what to do. To attempt any violence he well knew would arouse the whole city to a mad frenzy that might lead to lynching.

On the other hand, Dick went away in a rage. He felt insulted. The man meant to bribe him, and that was the greatest insult that could have been offered him.

Just what to do he did not know at the moment. His first impulse was to knock him down, but the man was armed, and had a way about him that caused Dick to wait and hear more.

"He means for me to understand that he is willing to pay me a round sum to bribe me not to push the case against his brother," reasoned Dick to himself, as he wended his way up the street. "He did not say so in so many words, but that's what he means, and he ought to be in jail with his brother for it. I'll talk with Ben about it and see what he thinks. Ben has a good head."

That evening he talked with Ben Wilson and told him what Jed Wattles had said to him.

"Hanged if he ain't a cool one!" exclaimed Ben.

"Yes, he is as cool as ice," remarked Dick.

"And all the more dangerous."

"Oh, I am not afraid of him," Dick said. "I am armed all the time now."

"Those Californians never let a fellow get the drop on them."

"Well, we Dunkirk lads are a little that way ourselves," returned Dick.

"So we are; but look out for him, Dick. He is the most dangerous man you have had to deal with yet in this business. He means to buy you off if he can, but to get rid of you at any price."

"He doesn't look like a man who would stab another in the back."

"Maybe he is not; but look out for him. He belongs to the Wattles family."

"I told him I would meet him to-morrow."

"Well, meet him where—where two of us—witnesses—can hear what is said. Then we can make him take water and leave the town."

"All right. I will try to get him to go to Benson's saloon, where we can sit and talk over the matter in private. You and Jack can get into the closet, back of the table near the closet door, where you can

hear all that's said. When I rap three times on the table with my beer glass both of you can come out and face him."

"Yes, that's the best way to serve him. When he learns what the penalty for attempting to bribe a witness is he will go away, and leave his brother to his fate."

"Probably he will. I don't wish to get him into any trouble, as I don't blame a man for trying to save his brother from State prison."

"No, though that brother is the worst of villains."

The two firemen parted and went to their respective quarters, after agreeing to meet on the following morning.

The Californian waited patiently for the hour when he was to meet the young fireman. But during the time of waiting he heard much of his history from several citizens who were discussing his merits as a man and a fireman.

"He is a brave fellow," thought Jed Wattles, as he heard incident after incident in his history mentioned, "and if he will take gold and keep quiet I would like to be his friend. Nick ain't as white as he ought to be, or he would not have allowed his friends to try to wipe the fireman out in the dark. I will tell him that I am not the kind that Nick is, if we are brothers. It's the name, not the man, I am trying to save from disgrace."

When the time came that was to bring Dick to the interview, he walked up to the hotel where Jed Wattles was stopping, and greeted him with:

"I promised to meet and talk with you to-day. I am at your service, sir."

"Thanks, sir. I am very glad to meet you, pard, as I have heard that about you to-day which says you are a white man.

"Oh, yes. I was born white," said Dick, laughing.

"I don't refer to the color of your skin. In California we have men of your color whom we don't regard as white men. Will you come up to my room and——"

"Well, no. I think we had better go round to Benson's, where we can have a glass of beer in a corner, and talk business on the quiet."

"You've hit it, pard. Lead the way, and I'll follow, even if it leads over the divide."

Dick led the way into Benson's saloon, and into the corner where Ben Wilson and Jack Cummins had concealed themselves in a closet just behind the table.

Dick and Jed seated themselves at the table and called for beer. A white-aproned waiter responded with two glasses of foaming liquid, which the Californian paid for.

"Now tell me your business in regard to me?" Dick asked.

"It is simply this," said Jed Wattles; "Nick Wattles is my brother. I care nothing for him. We have been separated for over ten years. I went to California and made a fortune in the mines, and now I find the family name about to be disgraced. I want to save the name—not at the expense of anybody else's name, but at the price of gold. Do you catch on?"

"Not exactly," said Dick, who wanted him to be more explicit in his proposition.

"How much will you charge to keep away from the court house on the day Nick is tried?"

Dick looked hard at him for a moment, and saw that he was not to be caught in a trap that way unless he was more explicit himself.

"How much are you willing to pay?" he asked.

"A big sum, on the square, pard."

"Do you wish to bribe me as a witness against your brother?"

"No; I wouldn't insult you with such an offer as that."

"Then I don't understand you."

The Californian looked at him in a manner that plainly betrayed the fact that he was suspicious of him.

"Do you want to understand me?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Your presence will convict my brother."

"My evidence will, I think."

"Your evidence can do him no harm if you are not there during the trial."

"Of course not."

"Then you understand me?"

"No; I do not."

"But I say you do," and the Californian looked him full in the face as he spoke. "You are no fool, nor am I one. I am not the man to put myself in another man's power. I have plenty of the yellow boys, and am willing to part with some of them to save my name from disgrace. Do you catch on now?"

"I do as far as you have gone, but you leave me in the dark still."

"Name your terms."

"I haven't any terms."

Jed Wattles glared at him as if trying to read his thoughts; but Dick seemed as innocent as an infant as he returned his gaze.

"You are not dealing square," the Californian said, after a pause.

"I am not dealing at all. I am here to hear what you have to say," was the quiet reply.

"Now, that you have heard my say, what have you to say?"

"I have nothing to say."

"You had made up your mind, then, before you came here?"

"Yes."

"Which shows you did understand my meaning," said Wattles, in a low tone of voice. "You are not the square man I thought you were. Our business is ended," and the man rose to his feet with a scowl on his face.

Dick rose, too, keeping his eyes on his man.

"You force me to defend my name. In California we call a man out and give him a chance with rifles or pistols—which weapons will you have?"

"I always carry a revolver with me," replied Dick, "and am ready at any time for an emergency," and he held his hand on his trusty revolver as he spoke.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE QUARREL AND CHALLENGE.

BEN WILSON and his friend Jack, in the closet behind Dick and the Californian, thought they were going to draw their weapons and fight then and there. They were anxious to prevent bloodshed, if possible, and so, without waiting for the signal agreed upon, they burst out of the closet and confronted the two men.

"Gentlemen," said Ben Wilson, "you must not fight. There has been enough blood shed over this affair."

"Who in native thunder are you?" demanded Jed Wattles, in very menacing tones, his hand on his revolver.

"They are friends of mine," said Dick, "and both of them are gentlemen."

"Were they in that closet with your knowledge and consent?" Jed demanded of Dick.

"Yes."

"Then you are a scoundrel and a coward, sir!"

"If you were not a Wattles I would consider myself insulted," said Dick, coolly.

"You don't consider yourself insulted, then?" Jed asked.

"No—you can't insult me."

The Californian glared at him for a minute or two, as if debating with himself what course to pursue.

Suddenly he spat in Dick's face.

"Does that insult you?" he asked, with a hiss of concentrated rage.

For answer Dick sprung forward and dealt him a stunning blow between the eyes that staggered him.

The Californian drew his revolver, but Ben Wilson sprung forward and caught the weapon ere he could use it. Jack caught Dick, and prevented him from shooting.

"You shall not fight here," said Ben. "I will call the police and have you both arrested!"

"But he shall fight me!" hissed Jed Wattles, perfectly livid with rage.

"I'll give you all the fight you want," said Dick, "here, now or anywhere."

"That's all I want. When shall we meet and where?"

"Do you mean a duel?" Ben Wilson asked.

"Yes—nothing else."

"Well, you won't have it. It is against the laws of this State, and Dick shall not become a law-breaker. I'll have you both put under bonds to keep the peace toward each other."

"Ben Wilson," said Dick, "we are old friends, and have stood side by side in the face of death; but if you want my friendship you must not interfere in this affair. He spat in my face, and nothing but a fight will atone for that. No apology will do."

"No apology will be offered," said Wattles.

"Nor accepted," added Dick.

"Dick Decker, you are not going to put your life against that of such a man, are you?"

"Hold!" hissed Jed; "if you utter another reflection on my character, I will cut your heart out of you!"

"I do not fear you, or any other of your name," retorted Ben.

"You fear me enough not to repeat your words," was the reply.

Ben was cool-headed, and did not care to precipitate a fight while trying to prevent one.

"I am not on the warpath," he remarked. "I prefer peace always."

"Then you have no business here. Give me my revolver, if you please."

"Not just yet."

By this time the few customers in the other end of the saloon saw that there was danger of a fight, and came running forward to see it.

But Ben and Jack were resolved that there should be no fight then and there, and would not allow them to get together.

But Dick was now too indignant over the terrible insult that had been put on him. He was determined to have a fight with the man who had dared to spit in his face.

Stepping close to the side of the Californian, he said in low tones:

"Go to your hotel and wait there till you hear for me. We will meet if we have to go to China."

"Ah, thank you! There's something in you after all," said Jed Wattles, as he turned on his heels and left the saloon.

The men who had gathered around in the expectation of seeing a fight were disappointed. But they were eager in their desire to know all about it, and who the other party was.

"Don't say a word," said Dick to both Ben and Jack. "It's all right, gentlemen, as you see. Only a few words with an acquaintance, which ended as you see."

"But who is he?"

"Never mind who he is. Come, Ben and Jack, let's go over to the engine-house."

The three firemen went away together, leaving the men in the saloon to think what they pleased about what had occurred.

On the way to the engine-house, Dick said to Ben and Jack:

"I never thought I would ever engage in a duel, but I am going to fight that man regardless of the consequences. Until I do I shall never be able to look my friends in the face again."

"Dick, you knocked him down for the insult," said Ben; "what more do you want?"

"A knock-down does not wipe it out, Ben. I must have more satisfaction than that."

"But suppose he kills you? What satisfaction will that be to you?"

"I will have the satisfaction of knowing that I did my best to kill him," was the reply, "and to get the chance to that I am willing that he should have the chance at me. Now, will you act as my friend in this matter?"

"Do you mean if I will act as your second in a duel?" Ben asked.

"Yes; that's what I mean."

"Then I will say no, on principle."

"Very well. Say nothing. Will you act for me, Jack?"

"No. I will commit no crime against the laws of the State," was Jack's reply.

"Then I will look elsewhere for a friend. I shall expect both of you to keep quiet and say nothing about this thing to any one till after it is over."

"But, Dick, do you know what you are going to do?" Ben asked.

"Yes, I think I do. I am going to have satisfaction."

"But you are also going to violate the law. You can punish him for the insult and——"

"Yes, I know I can have him arrested and fined. But that would give me no satisfaction. The law cannot reach the case at all. I must go behind the law and avenge the indignity that has been put upon me."

"You are excited now. To-morrow morning you will think better of it. Don't do anything till then."

"I will make no promises," and with that he turned away and left them, going in search of a man whom he believed would act as his friend in the matter.

The man was a physician who had been reared in the South, and who had no scruples about indorsing the Code. Dr. Edwards readily accepted the position, and went at once to see Jed Wattles, whom he found at his hotel. No notes of challenge and acceptance were necessary, as both parties understood each other.

"I have come on behalf of my friend, Dick Decker," said the doctor, "and beg that you will refer me to your friend who is to act for you."

"I have no friend here," was the reply, "as I have not a single acquaintance in your town. I am willing to go out without any friend."

"I cannot permit such a thing, sir. You must find a friend, and let this thing be conducted in order. Shall I get you a friend who will act for you?"

"Can you oblige me so?"

"Yes, I think I can."

"Then I am your friend for life," said the Californian. "You are a white man, sir, and that is saying a great deal."

Doctor Edwards went in search of his friend—a man whom he well knew—and found him at his place of business. Ten minutes of conversation was sufficient to arrange the affair. The man was then introduced to Jed Wattles, and it was arranged that they were to meet at sunrise the next morning at a point beyond the limits of the State, and fight at ten paces with revolvers.

In order to be able to be on the field at the appointed hour, both men, accompanied by their seconds, left Dunkirk that night on an early train, leaving everybody in ignorance of their destination.

But Ben Wilson was on the alert, and was determined to do all in his power to prevent a meeting, as he had reason to fear the Californian's skill in the use of the revolver.

CHAPTER XXIII.

NORA IN DISGUISE.

THE sub-foreman of the hook and ladder company, Ben Wilson, was extremely anxious to prevent a meeting between Dick and Wattles. He was not aware that Dr. Edwards had agreed to act for the young fireman. He was under the impression that the latter had concluded to let matters rest until the next day.

After tea Ben went around to Dick's quarters and found that he was gone. The landlady was under the impression that he was gone out of town for a few days.

"Who was with him, ma'am?" Ben asked, after a pause.

"Dr. Edwards was with him," was the reply.

"Good Heavens!" gasped Ben, "that means business. I must see about that at once."

He hastened to the hotel where Jed Wattles was stopping and found that he, too, was gone.

"They have gone out, to meet in the morning somewhere," muttered Ben, "and one or both will be killed. Both are mad enough to fight till one or both falls. If there is any one that can stop Dick it is Nora Norcross, and I will go and set her after him."

With Ben Wilson, to resolve was to act. He hastened down to the cottage of the fair Nora, and demanded an interview at once.

"What in the world is the matter, Mr. Wilson?" Nora asked, as she entered the room.

"When did you see Dick last?" he asked.

"Two evenings since," she replied. "Why do you ask? Has anything happened to him?"

"Nothing has happened yet," said he, "but if you do not interfere to prevent, something serious will happen," and then he proceeded to tell her all about the meeting with Jed Wattles and its result.

"They have both left the city," he continued, "to meet somewhere and fight a duel at sunrise. You are the only one who can do anything with him. He worships the ground you walk on, though I don't know that he has said anything about it to you, and will listen to what you say."

Nora was red and pale by turns.

"Yes," she added, laying her hand on his shoulder, "you are one of his best friends, Mr. Wilson, and I don't mind telling you our secret. Dick and I understand each other. We are engaged. I will do all in my power to prevent this duel. What must I do now? Tell me, for I am too bewildered to think."

"Dress yourself in masculine apparel again and go with me to the railway station. We may be able to find out there where they went. They will make for some point over the State line."

"Wait for me and I will soon be ready," she said, springing up and hastening out of the room.

In a very few minutes she came back again, dressed as a young man.

"Now I am ready to go," she said.

He escorted her to the railway station, where they ascertained that Dr. Edwards had bought tickets for two to a certain point.

"Was no one with him?" she asked of the ticket-seller.

"No, he was alone so far as I could see," was the reply.

"That point is only one mile from the State line," said Ben. "They will fight there at sunrise in the morning. You will have to take the next train and go there."

"Will you go, too?"

"I will risk his friendship if I do, as he already notified me that any effort on my part to interfere would make us enemies for life."

"Then you must not go, and I will not let him know that I have seen you. I will push right through, for I am armed and am not the least bit afraid."

"Have you money enough with you for all possible contingencies?"

"Why, I forgot all about money."

"There's more than enough," and he thrust a roll of bills into her hand. "You will have to hire a carriage, maybe, and may have need for a considerable sum."

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Wilson!" she said, tears coming into her eyes. "You are a true friend to my brave Dick."

"As he is to me," said Ben. "He would do anything for me."

The train came bounding along, and Nora shook hands with Ben and boarded it. The next minute she was bounding along at the rate of forty miles per hour toward the little village on the border line of the State.

In about three hours the train stopped at the little village, and she stepped out on the platform of the station. It was past midnight, and only the station-master and two passengers were there when the train left.

"Is there a hotel here in this place?" she asked of the station-master.

"Well, we hev a tavern hyer," he replied, "which is the same thing, I calkerlate."

"Yes, a tavern is what I mean."

"In course it is. Them fellers will show yer the tavern. They are going there."

"Yes, we are going to the tavern," said one of the two young men, who were a couple of New York drummers. "We've been here often. Come along. Have you any baggage with you?"

"No, I'm only on a flying trip," she replied.

"Oh, that's no matter. Come on."

They took up their heavy valises and led the way to the village tavern, and Nora went along with them as though she were an old traveler.

"Where are you from?" one of the young men asked.

"Dunkirk," she replied.

"Dunkirk! I was there the other day. Lively little city is Dunkirk. Had a first-class sensation when I was there."

"What was that?" she asked.

"There was a fire in a pork-store, and when one of the firemen went into the dwelling part of the building, four men attacked him with daggers. He drew his shooter, laid 'em all out, and left 'em to bake. But before he reappeared at the window, one of the prettiest girls in the town dashed through the crowd, dressed in men's clothes, ran up the ladder and sprang into the room before any one could stop her. She met him and made him come down while the crowd yelled themselves hoarse. Hanged if I didn't outyell the crowd, for she was the pluckiest girl I ever saw, and she was just the girl to stand by her fellow in trouble. I heard the next morning that she was a poor girl whose life he had saved in the great factory fire a few months before. They said her name was Nora Norcross. I got one of her pictures from one of the book stores where they were for sale, and then gave a dollar to the fund to buy a cottage home to present to her. They say that fellow, Dick Decker, is dead gone on her, and she is as badly smashed on him. If I thought it was not true, I would go back to Dunkirk, and lay my heart at her feet. Such girls are very scarce in this world. Here's the tavern. It isn't the finest in the world, but one can go further and fare worse, I can tell you."

During the walk Nora listened and said nothing. She was almost afraid the drummer who had seen her in Dunkirk in male attire, would recognize her in the light. But when the sleepy porter was called up, she discovered that only candles were used. By keeping well back in the dark, she managed to escape discovery.

Calling for a room, she went up-stairs, and was shown into one that looked out over a lawn.

The two drummers had a room on the other corner.

In the privacy of her room, Nora had more time to think than when she was on the cars.

"Is he here?" she asked herself a dozen times in half as many minutes. "I ought to find out before going to bed, or I may not see him in the morning till it is too late. How can I find out? That porter down-stairs ought to know? But will he tell me? Won't he be suspicious of me if I go down there and begin to ask questions? Ben said I would have to hire a carriage, and I ought to have said something to him about it. Ah! there's a light in the next room. It may be that Dick and Dr. Edwards are in there. I wisk I knew, for then I could watch them and govern my course by theirs. I will just see if he is in there."

Taking off her shoes, she tripped softly out into the corridor to the door of the next room, in which a light was still burning, and peeped through the key-hole.

She almost screamed at what she saw.

At a table in the center of the room sat Dick and Dr. Edwards examining a revolver.

Straightening herself to her full height, she resolved to make a supreme effort to prevent the fight on the morrow.

"If I let them know that I am here," she reasoned, "they will slip away from me in the morning, and then I shall have come all the way for nothing. No, I will go to the field with them, and interfere in time to prevent it."

She went back to her room fully resolved on her course, and in a few minutes was soundly sleeping,

Nora was a girl of remarkable nerve, as the reader has seen on more than one occasion. Her courage did not fail her now, so she slept sweetly without any nervousness.

When she awoke in the morning she found the stars fading away, and daylight fast coming on.

Springing out of bed, she hastily dressed herself, and then crept down-stairs into the little office of the tavern.

There she found a candle burning, but no one in there.

Suddenly she heard carriage wheels, and running to the door, saw a carriage driving rapidly away toward the State line.

CHAPTER XXIV.

ON THE FIELD OF HONOR.

"My God!" gasped Nora, on seeing the carriage roll away; "they have gone, and I am left!"

The landlord came in, for he it was who saw them off.

"Are you the landlord?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied.

"Have you another carriage you can let for the day?"

"No, sir."

"Nor any kind of vehicle?"

"Oh, I have a buggy," he said. "Where do you want to go?"

"I wish to follow that carriage wherever it goes."

The landlord started.

He looked hard at her for a minute or so, and asked:

"Do you know the men in that carriage?"

"Yes."

"Who are they?"

"Dick Decker and Dr. Edwards, of Dunkirk."

"Where are you from?"

"The same place?"

"Where are they going?"

"I don't know, but I want to follow and keep in sight of them. Can you let me have your buggy and a driver who knows the country round about here?"

"Yes; I will go with you myself."

"Then hurry up, or we may be too late for my purpose."

The landlord hastened out to the stable to put a horse to the old family buggy, and Nora waited in the little office of the tavern till he was ready.

To her the seconds seemed like minutes, and the minutes like hours, so impatient was she to be up and away to the field.

At last her patience would hold out no longer, and she sprang up and ran out to the stable.

"For God's sake, hurry up, sir!" she cried, "or we may be too late!"

"Too late for what?" he asked.

"To overtake them before they cross the State line."

"Well, we can't do that nohow," he said, "for they are there by this time. It's only a mile from here, you know."

A death-like pallor came over her, and she leaned against the buggy for support.

"What's the trouble, anyhow, young man?" he asked, stopping in his work to glare at her.

"The trouble is you are trifling with human life, sir. Oh, will you hurry up and get away? We have not a moment to lose!"

"Good gracious! why didn't you say so before?" and the man hurried his work, so that in ten minutes more they were ready to start.

"Go as fast as you can," she said, as she sprang into the buggy.

The landlord astonished the sleepy old horse with a severe whack of the lines, and a yell that startled the echoes. The old horse actually broke into a run, and made faster time than he had made since he was a colt.

But the buggy was much older than the horse. It rattled and creaked at a fearful rate, as it bounded along at the unusual speed it was going, and Nora became apprehensive of a catastrophe. Her apprehensions were realized. In crossing a little gully in the road it came apart, and both driver and passenger went down in the wreck.

"Oh, my God!" cried Nora, "this may cost both their lives!" and springing to her feet, she asked:

"Does this road lead to the State line?"

"Yes," said the man, "but a quarter of a mile off."

Nora started to go on afoot.

"Hold on!" cried the landlord.

"What's the matter!"

"I want pay for this!"

"Pay for what?"

"My buggy—you made me drive fast, and——"

"I hired you to take me to the State line, and you have not done so. On the contrary, you came near breaking my neck. I owe you nothing, and will pay you nothing."

"Young fellow," hissed the enraged Boniface, "pay me fifty dollars or I'll mash your head for you!" and he advanced toward her in a hostile manner.

Nora drew a tiny revolver.

"Old fellow," she retorted, "get out of my way or I'll put a bullet into you! I am not the kind you take me for."

"D-d-don't shoot!" gasped the old skinflint, turning deathly pale, and backing away.

"All right, then. I am only protecting myself from imposition," said Nora, and then she turned away and left him in the road with his wreck.

The sun was just beginning to gild the treetops with his golden tints, when she started off on foot toward the State line. As she looked down she espied the tracks of a carriage, which had evidently been made but a few minutes previous.

"Ah! I am on the right path!" she exclaimed. "I will soon be there. They will not go far beyond the line ere they stop;" and then, as if afraid of being too late, she broke into a run, and sped along the road like a blithe young lad behind his school hour.

Suddenly she saw a carriage drawn up by the roadsine in the bushes. She rightly divined that it was the carriage that Dick and Dr. Edwards had come in. But on looking around, she could see no one but the sleepy driver. When on the point of speaking to him she heard two pistol shots in the little clearing on the edge of the woods on her left.

"My God!" she gasped. "They are fighting, and I am too late!"

Bounding like a frightened fawn through the bushes, she suddenly came upon the field of honor.

Glancing at one of the principals, she saw that he was a stranger. The other one, then, must be Dick, she thought.

Looking the other way, she saw Dick lying on the ground, and Doctor Edwards kneeling by his side.

"He has fallen!" she gasped, pressing a hand to her heart as if to still its wild throbbing, and leaning heavily against a tree. For a moment or two she thought she was going to swoon, and made a desperate effort to regain command of herself.

The thought flashed over her that Wattles' gang had followed Dick for months to kill him, and that now one of them had shot him down. It maddened her to think about it.

Ben Wilson had told her who the Californian was.

Springing forward, she cried out:

"Jed Wattles, you are a scoundrel and a coward! You dare not fight *me!*"

"Who in thunder are you?" demanded the astonished Californian.

"A better man than any who ever wrote Jed Wattles for his name!" was the reply.

"Take your stand!" cried Jed Wattles. "I don't know who you are, but I will teach you a lesson you will not soon forget."

She ran to where Dick was lying, saw his white face turned up to the sky and the surgeon kneeling by his side. On the ground near him lay the still smoking revolver. She snatched it up and stood within three feet of him.

"I am ready!" she exclaimed.

Dr. Edwards looked up and saw that a young stranger had taken Dick's place.

"Hold! Who are you?" he asked.

"His friend—stand away. I will avenge him, or else lie by his side."

The doctor rose to his feet.

Wattles' second gave the word.

Both fired at the same time, and Jed was seen to throw up both hands, stagger forward, and fall flat on his face.

CHAPTER XXV.

A VERY STRANGE DUEL, AND THE RESULT.

THE two seconds seemed to be rooted to the spot by the sudden turn the duel had taken. They both stared at the youth in speechless wonder, as he stood there with the smoking revolver in his hand.

Then the second went to the fallen man and turned him over on his back.

A single glance told the story.

"He is dead," he said.

"I am satisfied," said the youth, in a hard, metallic voice. "How is the other one? Is he dead?"

"No," said the surgeon, going back to Dick's side. "He will live."

"Thank God!" she exclaimed, and then she sank down into a death-like swoon.

"What does this mean?" exclaimed the doctor, rushing forward. "He must be wounded, too."

Kneeling by the side of the youth, he tore open the bosom of his coat in search of a wound.

"Good heavens! It's a woman!" he cried, looking the picture of amazement.

"What!" exclaimed the other second, running forward.

"It's a woman—and she is Nora Norcross, of Dunkirk!"

The doctor had seen the picture of that face too often not to know it now.

"Is she hurt?" the other asked.

"Run down to the spring there and get your hat full of water," said the doctor. "She may have only fainted and will soon recover."

The man ran down along a small path that led to a spring of clear, cold water, and in a few minutes returned with his hat full of water, which the doctor sprinkled liberally on the face of the unconscious girl.

She groaned and opened her eyes with a start.

"Are you better now?" the doctor asked.

"Where am I?" she asked, trying to rise from the ground.

"You are with friends, Miss Norcross," said Dr. Edwards, "so don't be uneasy."

She glared at the doctor on hearing her name called.

"Is he alive?" she asked.

"Yes; he was only stunned by a scalp wound, and will soon recover. Are you hit?"

"No; I am not hurt."

"I am very glad to hear that."

Just then they heard a deep groan from Dick, and turning to him saw that he was coming to.

The surgeon took charge of him again, and watched the process of returning consciousness.

Dick opened his eyes and groaned again, raising his hand to his head.

When he took it away it was covered with blood.

"You are all right, Dick, my boy," said the surgeon, "but it was a close call. The bullet grazed your head so hard as to stun you, and tear up the scalp."

"No worse than that, doctor?" Nora asked.

The sound of her voice had a magical effect on him. He sprang up on his elbow and glared at her, as she reclined on the grass not four feet from him.

"My God, Nora!" he gasped; "you here!"

"Yes, Dick," she replied. "I came to prevent the duel, but was too late. You are hurt, my hero."

"Yes; but I will get over it and be as sound as ever. But where is he, doctor? Was he hit?"

"He is dead," said the surgeon.

"Did I hit him, then?"

"No. He was hit by the second shot."

"Second shot!" he exclaimed.

"Don't tell him, doctor, please," said Nora.

Dick heard her and sprang up.

"Yes," he said, "tell me everything. I don't remember any second shot."

"The lady there took your place, and had the second fire," said the man who had acted as Wattles' second in the affair.

Dick glared at Nora in profound amazement.

"I—I—thought—you—were dead," she said, in faltering tones, "and wanted to avenge you. Oh, I am sorry I did it."

"I must be dreaming," said the young fireman, scarcely able to comprehend all he heard.

"No; you are not dreaming," the doctor said. "You will have a pretty sore head for some time."

"But I shall have the prettiest nurse in the world, doctor, so I don't mind that. But how came you to let her fight him? She might have been killed."

"Didn't know who she was till after she had laid him out. I never saw anything done more neatly in my life. She is a born duelist, Dick, and no mistake."

"Oh, for Heaven's sake, don't let it be known that I was here!" she pleaded, with tears in her eyes. "It will give me a reputation I would not have for worlds."

"We will not say anything about it," the surgeon said, looking over at the dead man's second.

"Yes, we will agree to keep that part of the affair a secret," the man said. "I would not have it known that I seconded a man in a duel against a woman. Had I suspected who she was, I would not have permitted the duel."

Nora thanked the two men, and then turned her attention to the man whom she had come so far to save.

But a new danger now menaced them—one they had not counted on.

The old tavern-keeper whom Nora had left with his wrecked vehicle in the middle of the road, had met a half dozen citizens of the county, and told them that he suspected a duel was about being fought just over the State line.

The party came on at once, and found the others about to enter the carriages to return.

The dead man was left where he fell. They did not care to take charge of the remains, as arrests would follow, and no end of trouble be the result.

"Here!" cried one of the men, seizing hold of Dr. Edwards, "who killed that man?"

"I don't know was the reply.

"I arrest the whole party for the murder!" exclaimed the man, growing greatly excited.

"Are you an officer?" the doctor asked.

"No, I am only a citizen."

"Of which State?"

"New York State."

"Well, we are not in New York State. We have broken no law of that State. So if you don't take your hands off of me I will put a bullet into you."

The citizen saw that he was at a disadvantage, and so he released his hold on the surgeon.

"Come, let's get away from here," said the surgeon, leading Dick away from the spot to the carriage.

Nora and the other followed, and in another moment all four were speeding back to the village.

They overtook the tavern-keeper gathering up the wreck of his buggy and putting it into a wagon to carry back home.

But they lost no time in that part of the country. They drove direct to the depot, where a train for New York was due in ten minutes. Once on board the train they had no fears of an arrest.

The train came thundering along, and all four boarded it, after paying carriage hire and a good round fee for silence on the part of the drivers.

The train reached New York in four hours. But the telegraph had sent the news of the duel all over the country.

Taking a train from New York, they reached Dunkirk two hours later, where everybody was talking about the duel. The news had come that Wattles was dead and Dick Decker badly wounded.

Of course the most intense excitement prevailed in Dunkirk. That Dick had laid out another of the Wattles' gang, was a source of intense satisfaction to all his friends. But they all condemned the duel, on the ground that he had given his antagonist a chance to kill him.

"There was no sense in that," they said.

But then there were others who thought differently, and so public opinion was divided. Yet everyone was glad that he had killed his man and escaped with his own life.

When he reached Dunkirk, he told Nora to slip out on the other side of the train to escape being recognized as one of the party, as much would be said about it in the event of her trip being found out. She did as he advised, and reached home in safety without being discovered.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE LAST DESPERATE ATTEMPT AT MURDER.

A CARRIAGE was called, and Dick was ushered into it by Dr. Edwards as quickly as possible, but they were not able to avoid being recognized.

"Hurrah for Dick Decker!" yelled a small boy, who saw and instantly recognized the gallant young fireman.

"Where is he, where is he?" cried a score of others.

"In that carriage. Whoop! He's the gamest chicken in the hull lot!"

And the gang chased the carriage like so many wild young Indians. The news flew from mouth to mouth that the young fireman had returned. Hundreds ran at once to his place of abode, and in a few minutes the street in front of the house was jammed with people anxious to learn the extent of his wound.

As Doctor Edwards did not care to have any questions put to him in public, he requested a brother physician to examine the wound and report to the crowd.

It was done, and the people went away satisfied that their hero was not in any very great danger of death from the wound.

That evening the hook and ladder company turned out in full uniform, stopping in front of the house and giving three cheers for their gallant foreman.

Ben Wilson went in to see him, and told him the boys wanted to know how he was.

"Tell 'em I am pretty sore just now," he said, "but that I will be up again in a few days."

The next day Nora and her mother called on him.

"If you need a nurse I will stay and take care of you, Dick," said the widow.

"Oh, I am not so bad off as that," he said. "It's only a scratch."

"How did you get it?" a man in the room asked.

"I fell down," he replied.

"Oh, yes, I see," and the man laughed.

Dick and his friends had agreed never to acknowledge any participation in the duel, in order to keep from being arrested and tried for it, as dueling was against the laws of both States.

Many men tried to get Dr. Edwards and the other second to give

some particulars about the duel, but they were as mum as clams, and would not talk about it to any one.

Ben Wilson asked Nora if she found him before the fight came off, and the brave girl told him all her adventures up to the moment she saw the carriage standing in the bushes near the dueling ground. Beyond that she would not say a word, which showed that a woman could keep a secret when she tried hard to do so.

When Nick Wattles was told that his brother had been killed in a duel with Dick Decker, he broke down completely and wept like a child. He had two more brothers who had been engaged in the conspiracy to get rid of the young fireman. But they were not the men to face danger as Jed had done. He was in despair, and regarded his game as hopeless.

In this condition he sent for his two brothers. They dared not go to Dunkirk, as the public feeling against them was too pronounced. They sent one of their trusted chums, who came and had a long talk with the prisoner.

"Joe," said Wattles to the man, after the jailor had closed the door and left them alone together, "I am in a bad plight."

"Yes," was the reply.

"Jed acted like a fool. With all the money he had he could have hired men enough to fix that fellow without running into any danger himself."

"Jed was a game man, Nick, and died game. You ought to be the last man to say anything against him."

"Oh, I am not saying anything against him, except to say he made a mistake, that's all."

"It's too late to say even that much. He was very rich, and has left his pile to his next of kin, which takes in you three brothers."

"Well, it may take all my share to save me from State Prison. Now, I will agree to give ten thousand dollars to the man that wipes out that man Dick Decker."

"You will?"

"Yes, in clean cash."

"Well, I can find a man to do it at that price."

"Well, do it, and the money shall be paid. There is no other way to save me. If he goes into court and swears against me I am gone up for ten years or more. But get a man who can do the business. We have had failures enough. Every attempt only makes matters worse. That fire in which four men lost their lives was a terrible thing, and set everybody against me."

"His death would be even worse, would it not?"

"Yes—in the public mind; but if he does not come into court, I will go out a free man. That is all I want. I will not live here after the trial anyway."

The man went out of the jail with the determination to make the ten thousand dollars himself.

"It is an easy thing to do if one knows how to do it," he said to himself, as he wended his way back to the train which was to return him to New York. "I can wait and watch my time, and give him a bullet through the head that will settle the business at once. With no witness no one can accuse me of the crime. I'll look after the job myself."

Joe Mangum was a typical New York rough, who would never keep such a thing as a conscience about him. He had run with the Wattles' gang since early boyhood, and knew just what they were. He had a hatred for the man who had laid six or seven men out, and wanted the satisfaction of fixing him himself.

On his return to New York, Joe met the Wattles brothers, and told them that Nick wanted one more effort made to save him from the penalty of his crime.

"How in creation can we do it?" one of the brothers asked. "*I* don't care to go fooling round that fellow. He is a bad one, and everybody is ready to hurrah when he knocks somebody out."

"Just leave him to me," whispered Joe. "I will attend to him."

"*You?*"

"Yes. If I don't down him you may as well give up the fight and let Nick go to State prison."

"What will you do?"

"Leave that to me, and ask no questions."

"All right: but look out for yourself, that's all."

"That's just what I am going to do," was the reply.

"Do you know him by sight?"

"No. I will go out and make his acquaintance."

Joe moved out to Dunkirk, and boarded at a private boarding-house. In a few days he had seen the young fireman, as nearly everybody had something to say about him.

Then he began to find out about the places the young fireman visited, in order to adopt some definite plan or spot in which to wait for him.

At last, after a week's hunting around, he decided to wait for him on the nights he visited Nora Norcross. There were several corners he had to turn on his way to the Norcross cottage.

In the meantime Dick had come to the conclusion that the duel with Jed Wattles had about broken up the gang, and was no longer on his guard against danger.

The trial of Nick Wattles was to take place in another week, and it seemed as if they had given up the fight.

One night, when Dick was on his way to the Norcross cottage, as he turned a corner near the spot where he had encountered Palmer and beat him to death, he was startled by the flash of a revolver almost in his face.

The bullet grazed his head and partially stunned him.

But ere the man could fire again Dick knocked him down.

Then he took up the weapon, which had fallen to the ground.

The shot caused a policeman to run to the spot.

"Hello! What's this?" the officer demanded, as he saw Dick give the man another blow when he attempted to rise.

"This man shot me," said Dick, turning to the officer.

"Oh, you are Dick Decker, are you?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'll take him into custody. Come and go with me to the station and make complaint. I did not see him do anything, you know."

"Nor have I done anything," said the man. "He attacked me when I met him!"

"Come along here!" exclaimed the officer. "We have been laying out you fellows for months," and he marched him off to the station-house, whither Dick went also to prefer complaint against him.

The news soon spread that Dick had been shot at again, and that the would-be murderer was in the station-house. Several of the hook and ladder boys heard of it, and repaired at once to the engine-house.

CHAPTER XXVII.

CONCLUSION.

In a couple of hours nearly half a hundred firemen were assembled in the engine-house. Dick appeared and told them he was unhurt save where the bullet had grazed him so close as to raise a blister.

"He tried to kill you, did he not?" Ben Wilson asked.

"Yes, I believe he did."

"Then turn out with the ladders, boys!" cried Ben, and the next instant the whole company donned their hats and red shirts.

"What are you going to do?" Dick demanded.

"We are going to arrest you for not killing the man on the spot," said Ben, and then five firemen surrounded him and made him prisoner.

"Hang me, if I understand this, boys," said the young fireman.

"Wait till the parade is over, and then you will understand all about it," said one of the five.

The truck was run out by the boys, and, with a hurrah, they dashed down the street to the station-house, where Joe Mangum was locked up in a cell.

With a rush, they went into the station and said:

"The place is on fire! Where is it?"

"No!" cried the astonished captain. "It's a false alarm. There is no fire here. You have been hoaxed."

"Which is the man who shot Dick?"

One of the policeman pointed out the cell without thinking of the consequences.

They then got the key.

The door was opened and the prisoner dragged out.

The police were powerless to interfere, and did not attempt to.

Seeing so many red-shirted firemen around him, the prisoner appealed to the police to protect him.

"The police can't protect you," said one of the firemen, "and we are going to save you ourselves."

"What are you going to do?" he asked, trembling like a leaf.

"Hang you!" roared fifty men in a hoarse chorus.

Then they led him out into the street in front of the station, where two ladders had been put up in the form of a pyramid. He was led under them, more dead than alive, and a rope put around his neck.

"Up with him!"

Up he went, his feet going nearly ten feet above the ground.

The grim, red-shirted heroes around the ladders prevented any interference on the part of the police. The officers did not try very hard to rescue him, however, for their sympathies were with the brave firemen.

The news that the firemen were lynching a man in the heart of the city created the most intense excitement. In a half hour thousands of people were out on the streets gazing at the man hanging under the ladders.

The mayor called out all the police in the city, and had the body taken down. The firemen marched back to the engine-house, where they met and passed resolutions that henceforth they would mete out death to all men who tried to take the life of a fireman.

The most intense excitement prevailed throughout the city and State over the lynching, and many were disposed to censure the firemen. But in the city of Dunkirk the sentiment was all in their favor.

Dick was not blamed in any way, but he did not condemn his comrades.

"It served him right," he said, "and it may be a lesson to others."

The trial of Nick Wattles came off at last, and Dick Decker was present to testify against him.

His testimony was plain and to the point, and the verdict of the jury was in accordance with it.

The incendiary was sentenced to ten years in State prison, and that was the last of the Wattles gang in Dunkirk. As for the two brothers in New York, they went to California to get the property left by their brother Jed, and never came back East any more.

The conviction of Nick Wattles was looked upon by the firemen of Dunkirk as a victory of Dick Decker over their enemy, and great rejoicing was the result.

They had a grand parade through the streets of the city, and their engine and ladder truck were hung with flowers.

A gold medal was presented to Dick by the mayor for his gallant conduct in saving human life in the conflagrations.

Just after the parade a fire broke out in the warehouse, and the brave firemen rushed promptly to the rescue. The fire was an obstinate one, and kept them out all night. But they never flinched from duty, and in the end they conquered the flames, and returned to their quarters in triumph.

The happiest soul in Dunkirk when Wattles was convicted and sentenced was Nora Norcross.

"They will not have any incentive to take his life now," she said to her mother. "He may now live in peace. I am so glad, mother, for I love him better than my own soul! He is so brave, and yet as gentle as a little child!"

A month after the conviction of Nick Wattles, Nora Norcross named the day when she would change her name and become Mrs. Dick Decker.

Dick invited every fireman in the city to stand up with him in firemen's hats and red shirts. He wore the same himself, even to the silver trumpet.

Such a wedding had never before been seen in Dunkirk, and it created an excitement in society there.

After the ceremony at the church the firemen seated the happy couple on the hook and ladder truck, and pulled them through the city to their cottage home, where they were left to the full enjoyment of their love for each other.

Several years have passed since then; and now Dick dances two little boys on his knees, and tells them how he met their mother in a burning building and brought her out through FLAME AND SMOKE.

[THE END.]

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